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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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The last period was marked by a series of important events for the Republic of Moldova.



The Republic of Moldova will receive observer status with the Eurasian Economic Union in October, at the next summit of the organization, said President Igor Dodon in an interview for the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*. Dodon said the Eurasian Economic Union needs time to examine his request, because there is no precedent yet of countries with Eurasian Economic Union observer status.



The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have completed the technical preparations for the opening of joint control checkpoints on the Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border at the Pervomaisk-Cuciurgan checkpoint. The Moldovan authorities have assured that expanding of the joint border control with Ukraine on the Transnistrian segment will not harm the interests of ordinary citizens. The explanation comes after the Tiraspol separatist authorities, supported by Moscow, complained that the initiative of introducing the Moldo-Ukrainian border control would mean a blockade of the Transnistrian region.



On May 5th the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted in the first reading the transition to the mixed electoral system - a compromise negotiated by the Democratic Party with the socialist opposition. At a press conference, the speaker of parliament Andrian Candu said it was a "necessary compromise for the good of the country," even if the Democratic Party was in favour of the uninominal system. Candu also said that the final vote will not take place until the endorsement in June of the draft law by the Venice Commission. In his turn, Igor Dodon qualified the Friday's vote in Parliament as a victory of the Socialist faction in the fight against the uninominal vote. Several representatives of the civil society and parties gathered in front of Parliament to protest against changing of the electoral system, saying the latter is antidemocratic and is going to eliminate smaller parties from the Moldovan political scene and divide power among the democrats and socialists.



Turkey's Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, paid a visit to the Republic of Moldova on the 5th and 6th of May. The visit programme included meetings with the leadership of the Republic of Moldova, participation in the inauguration of the Embassy of Turkey in Chisinau and the Businessmen Forum, and a visit to the Mother and Child Institute. The Turkish Prime Minister also participated in the Gagauz Congress, which took place in Comrat. "Even if we do not have common borders, we are connected by the Black Sea and the Gagauz ethnicity, therefore we should support each other in good and bad times," the Turkish premier said. According to official data, in 2016, the volume of the foreign trade of the Republic of Moldova with Turkey amounted to over 334 million dollars. More than 1200 Turkish capital-enterprises are active in the Republic of Moldova, with investments in their social capital amounting to about 378 million lei.



Only two Moldovan political parties would enter the Parliament if Parliamentary elections were held: the Socialists' Party with 33.6% and the "Action and Solidarity" Party, with 24.8%. These are the results of the recent Barometer of Public Opinion (BOP) presented by the Public Policy Institute. No party in government at the moment would make it to the future parliament, shows BOP, conducted between April 16th-23rd. The country's president, former Socialist leader Igor Dodon and PAS leader, Maia Sandu, are the most trustworthy politicians, with 32% and 17%, respectively.

How is the Republic of Moldova handling the issue of the Gagauz autonomy?



Lina Grâu

23 years after the adoption of the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) in 1994, there is still tension between Chisinau and Comrat. The central authorities are accused by regional politicians of failing to comply with the legal norms on the Gagauz autonomy. There are several competencies of the region

provided by the legislation that Comrat considers assumed in an unjustified way by Chisinau - police, education, customs. Over the years, the Gagauz politicians have called for expansion of the autonomous budget categories and creation of the Regional Development Agency in Gagauzia.

After Chisinau declared the European integration a strategic objective of the

Republic of Moldova, Comrat organized two referenda - one consultative and the other one "legislative".

In the first referendum, the voters received two ballots, where they answered with "yes" or "no" to the questions: "Do you agree with the choice of the external development course of the Republic of Moldova aimed at joining the European Union?", "Do you agree with the choice of Moldova's foreign development course aimed at joining the Customs Union (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan)?" The Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union option was supported by 98 percent of the voters.

The second referendum, held on the same day, was a legislative one and had one ballot with the question: "Do you agree that the UTA Gagauzia adopts a law allowing Gagauz people to exercise their right to self-determination in case the Republic of Moldova changes its status of an independent state?" 98.8 percent of the voters gave a "yes" answer to this question.

According to the 2014 census, the autonomy has about 135 thousand inhabitants, which represents 4.5 percent of the population of the Republic of Moldova. The Gagauz autonomy is the region with the lowest standard of living compare to the national average. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the average salary of UTA Gagauzia in 2015 accounted for only 77% of the national average salary.

In 2015, 59 percent of the region's revenues were transfers from the state budget, while its own revenues accounted for only 7.6 percent. The amount of non-reimbursable loans to the region coming mainly from the European Union and Turkey increased fourfold between 2011-2015- from 0.6 percent to 2.2 percent of the region's revenues.

According to the data of the Economic Development Department of the region, the EU Member States are the main market for the goods produced in the region. In 2015, the value of the goods exported to the EU markets amounted to 784 million lei, while in the CIS countries - 562 million lei.

Mindaugas Kacerauskis: Gagauzia can serve as a positive example for Transnistria in the regulatory process



Mindaugas Kacerauskis, political officer of the EU Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, points out that there are autonomy models in the EU that function very well and which could be taken over by the Republic of Moldova.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Why has the EU paid more attention to the Gagauz autonomy in recent years? Do you think the region has the potential to become a model for resolving separatist conflicts? How do you appreciate the dialogue between Chisinau and Comrat?

■ **Mindaugas Kacerauskis:** You are right that the EU has been paid increased attention to Gagauzia in recent year. Exactly in the EU there exist successfully implemented models

of autonomies that do function. Moldova's experience with Gagauzia is unique in the sense that the settlement of the dispute in the early 90es was completely peaceful and did not require any foreign involvement or mediation. An agreement was reached on delimitation of competences between the central authorities and the Autonomy which resulted in the adoption of the 1994 Law on the Special Legal Autonomous Status of Gagauzia. However, this law has been poorly implemented over the 23 year-period of its functioning, its role in the Moldovan hierarchy of laws having not been clearly defined. The main EU's objective vis-a-vis Gagauzia is the implementation of the 1994 Law on the basis of the 2002 Venice Commission recommendations and the 2013 OSCE report. The functioning of Gagauzia Autonomy stands high also on the agenda of the EU-Moldova Human Rights dialogue. The smooth functioning of the Gagauzia Autonomy is important for the EU in terms of the fulfilment of one of the EU's priorities: creation of an inclusive society. Gagauzia should serve also as a positive example for Transnistria in the settlement process, and on the contrary – it can have a deterring effect in case the provisions of the Autonomy, agreed back in 1994, are not respected by the central authorities.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What place does the EU occupy in the exports of the Gagauzian autonomy? What European investments exist in the autonomy?

■ **Mindaugas Kacerauskis:** There is no special statistics about exports or imports to/ from Gagauzia. Neither EUROSTAT nor the Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova produce such statistics. It is available only for the entire country without specifying its regions. The same is about investments. However, I am sure that large amounts of the Gagauzian products, especially its very high quality wine, are on the shelves of the EU supermarkets. Probably the authorities of Gagauzia (office of Bashkan) could provide more information about the geography of Gagauzia's exports. In any case, we feel a great interests on the part of Gagauzia exporters to enter the EU market.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What projects, grants and credits did the EU offer to the Gagauz autonomy in recent years? What is their value and what domains are they targeting?

■ **Mindaugas Kacerauskis:** The EU has allocated 6.5 million EUR for Gagauzia and Taraclia for their regional and rural development (ENPARD programme). EU has also decided to provide to the authorities in Gagauzia a grant for small infrastructure projects as well as training and capacity building. The EU is also active in Gagauzia in supporting local civil society organizations in conducting various projects related to good governance, community empowerment, human rights and capacity building. Some of the EU Member States are particular active in Gagauzia in implementing various projects, including support to SMEs, infrastructure, health sector, education, etc. Romania is the main donor for Gagauzia among the EU Member States. Facilitating of learning of the Gagauz and Romanian languages is also among donor's priorities.

Elena Bacalu: Many of the problems have not been solved because of lack of communication



establishing a dialogue between the central and regional authorities.

MP Elena Bacalu, co-chair of the working group of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova and the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, says that many of the problems between Chisinau and Comrat have not been solved because of lack of communication.

■ **Elena Bacalu:** Considering the need to continuously modernize Moldovan legislation and taking into account the recommendations of the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities and of the Council of Europe, as well as the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, this working group has been created based on the Parliament's decision from the 20th of November 2015. The members of the working group represent all factions of the Parliament. A similar decision was adopted by the People's Assembly of Gagauzia through which five people were appointed to serve in this group. The purpose of the working group is to adjust the legislation of the Gagauz autonomy to the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova.

A number of objectives were set, including the establishment of dialogue between the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova and the People's Assembly of Gagauzia regarding the assurance of the UTA Gagauzia functionality under the

The complicated situation created around the Gagauz autonomy after the 2014 referendum required rethinking of the attitude of the central authorities towards the Gagauz autonomy. Thus, besides the fact that the budget categories of the UTA Gagauzia were extended, the transfers from the state budget to the regional budget have increased and a Regional Development Agency has been created in the region. Also, there was created a working group consisting of MPs from the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova and members of the Gagauz People's Assembly for delimitation of UTA Gagauzia competences within the constitutional norms of the Republic of Moldova. The working group is an important element in

constitutional norms of the Republic of Moldova.

Another objective was to analyse the compliance of the Law No. 344 of 23 December 1994 on the special legal status of Gagauzia with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova.

Other objectives included elaboration of the Action Plan by ensuring the functionality of UTA Gagauzia and of the legislation of the Republic of Moldova in accordance with the constitutional provisions; consolidation of the national legislation with regard to the special status of UTA Gagauzia and delimitation of the competences of the central and autonomous bodies; drafting modifications to the national and autonomous legislation.

What I have to say is that initially we did not have an easy communication. There was need for some time to establish a communication between our parliamentary groups. We have been active for more than half a year and there is also an activity report for this period. We took a break starting from October-November when the electoral campaign for the election in the People's Assembly of the autonomy was launched. Now I learned that new members of the working group have been already appointed in Comrat and obviously the activity of the working group will be resumed soon.

Over the course of half a year, the working group has had 26 meetings and adopted more than 21 decisions of recommendatory nature that have been submitted to the authorities in charge.

When I started working on the ground, knowing little about Gagauzia, I was thinking that there were not so many problems, but during the process I have realized that there are a lot of problems that need to be solved.

■ **Lina Grâu:** And what were the main outcomes of the working group?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** At the request of our colleagues in Gagauzia, representatives of several ministries were invited, especially those involved in the financing of projects in the territory.

We have to admit, and our colleagues in Gagauzia had to admit it too, that many of their complaints regarding the financing of projects were not exactly objective. We know it very well that in order to get funding for a project, you need to prepare and submit project proposals in accordance with the standards agreed. The Moldovan Investment Fund, the Energy Efficiency Fund and the Environmental Fund are also working based on this principle.

That is why they finally understood, and we also suggested to them that within the executive body they create a department whose specialists will only work on drafting and submitting project proposals.

One important result of the working group was the solution of another long-standing issue of the autonomy. At the level of the Republic of Moldova there were three regional development agencies- the Northern Regional Development Agency, the Central Regional Development Agency, and the Southern Regional Development Agency. Gagauzia

was part of the Southern Regional Development Agency and the Gagauz authorities were very dissatisfied with that as they wanted to have a separate Regional Development Agency for Gagauzia. At the recommendation of the working group such an agency was established in the region.

Another decision of the working group was to train specialists in the field of justice. Thus, at the recommendation of the working group, the Superior Council of Prosecutors decided that an additional five candidates for the position of prosecutors in UTA Gagauzia be admitted to the contest in 2016.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Why has this been done?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** All members of the working group came to the conclusion that the specialists from Gagauzia in this field were not prepared enough. Comrat has been requesting that the specialists in these institutions be from the Gagauz region. When the contests were announced, it was very difficult to select candidates from the region as they didn't meet the requirements. That is why the working group has decided to allocate additional resources to get these specialists trained.

At the initial stage of its work, the working group focused its attention mainly on solving the social-economic issues. For the first time, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova approved the Government's programme of activities, which includes a separate section dedicated to the cooperation between the central public authorities and UTA Gagauzia. Namely in this context, the working group supported the

initiative of holding the Government meeting in UTA Gagauzia on March 24, 2016. Following that meeting, the Agency for Regional Development was established in the region.

One of the objectives of the working group is to get approval by the Government of the Republic of Moldova of an action plan for improving the social and economic situation of UTA Gagauzia for the period of 2017-2019.

The working group is assisted by specialists from the Parliament's and People's Assembly secretariats. We will need trainings for these specialists and additional resources will be needed in order to hire more people who will only be responsible for the activity of the working group.

The maintenance, development, consolidation and continuity of the dialogue should become a priority for the Parliament and the People's Assembly, providing the opportunity to crystallize a professional mechanism for addressing and solving the problems between the region and the centre.

■ **Lina Grâu:** You said that you have found out that there are many issues to be discussed between Chisinau and Comrat. Which are the most important and why have they not been discussed so far?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** I believe that many of the issues have not been discussed or solved because of lack of communication. It was in this context that the working group was formed - to improve the communication, to see what the problems are and to get involved in solving these problems.

As I said above, not all of the complaints of our colleagues in Gagauzia were fair and justified - especially those pertaining to the allocation of financial resources for project implementation. They also understood this and drew conclusions as to what to do next.

There have been already several months since the working group hasn't met but this is because of the local elections in Gagauzia and the need to appoint new members from Comrat.

■ **Lina Grâu:** When do you think the activity of the working group will be resumed?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** In a few weeks I think we will resume the work of the working group.

■ **Lina Grâu:** In recent years, there has been a greater interest in the Gagauz autonomy- the working group has been established, the EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova is paying more attention to the region and allotting more European funds. Why is this happening?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** I don't think I can say how the situation in this respect was before, but there is also a big opening from the Government and the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova to identify the problems and allocate financial resources to solve them, apart from what has already been done.

■ **Lina Grâu:** When talking about the Gagauz autonomy, the parallel with the Transnistrian region and the separatist phenomenon appears. We have also witnessed the statements by the Bashkan that the geostrategic

orientation of Gagauzia is not the European Union, as the Moldovan Government says, but the Russian Federation, and also other statements of this kind. These things suggest a certain kind of separatism that leads to what happened in the Transnistrian region. Do you think there are prerequisites for this to change?

■ **Elena Bacalu:** I believe that most of the people in Comrat have understood where the financial sources come from and then we cannot compare Gagauzia with Transnistria because this is a completely different situation.

There is a problem here and what we should do in the near future is to bring to the attention of all citizens of UTA Gagauzia the achievements of the Moldovan leadership related to the autonomy. I have told my colleagues at one of the meetings that it is not good that the autonomy is not speaking of the results of the working group. I personally insisted and went to a TV station in Gagauzia where I talked about the activity of the working group and about what it should do next.

I would like to tell you that not once at the meetings of the working group we discussed that the Gagauz citizens should do more to learn the Gagauz language. Unfortunately, this is still a problem - in many institutions, including kindergartens, the mother tongue is not studied, but rather Russian. Concerning the Romanian language, there is a good beginning and we hope to continue with studying it in the region. There are already groups in pre-school institutions with Romanian language as well as in schools. Gradually, things will improve also in this direction.

Vadim Ceban: We need Romanian and Gagauz language study programmes

Vadim Ceban, First Deputy Chairman of the Executive Committee of Gagauzia and former Deputy Minister of Economy of the Republic of Moldova, says that all problems at the country level are also present in the autonomy, yet the poverty and migration are higher in the Gagauz region than in the rest of the country. According to him, the Chisinau governmental teams have acted more as firefighters in eliminating certain conflicts, instead of having concrete reform plans for the Gagauz autonomy.



■ **Lina Grâu:** What is the social-economic situation of the Gagauz autonomy? According to the statistical data, the population of the autonomous region of Gagauzia has the lowest income and standard of living in the Republic of Moldova. How do you explain this?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** If we talk about the average salaries in the economy and the real sector, in Gagauzia, they are by 25 percent lower than the national

average. In addition, we have a very high percentage of people included in the socially vulnerable category. We have over 12 thousand disabled people and with 27 thousand employees this is an enormous number and a huge burden on the social budget.

As far as communities are concerned, on the one hand, we are in a rather good position in terms of social infrastructure - water, sewerage, gas, internet, communications, but on the other

hand, the economic indicators are lower compared to other regions.

However, we have some encouraging elements – the industrial production is increasing - last year it increased by 20 percent- as well as the exports. Last but not least, we registered an increase by almost 33% in the revenues of the regional budget last year. This gives us the opportunity to invest more in infrastructure, because this is one of the region's biggest problems. We also want to be more active in attracting private investment in the region.

And of course, we confront the same problems as the Republic of Moldova. This is migration and decrease in the stable population. Many people leave for abroad for jobs and lately there have been already a migration of families, together with children. We have a rather high birth rate compared to other southern districts and the kindergartens are almost full, but we also have very many children who after the gymnasium stage leave the country. It is a phenomenon characteristic to the whole country, but in Gagauzia this is particularly acute.

The social side is a great concern for us, because most of the population's income comes from the agricultural sector. The number of the rural population is fairly high and for most of the citizens the remittances and social assistance is the second largest source of income. In this case, the solution could be to create jobs in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and other industries. This is the priority number one for the regional authorities.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Mr Ceban, what does the cooperation with the central authorities look like?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** At this moment we are working very actively with the Government, which approved an action

plan for improvement of the social and economic situation that includes measures in the area of education, health, social aspects, infrastructure, economy, transport, etc.

We are glad that in 2016 a Government meeting took place in Avdarma, Gagauzia, which took several decisions regarding the increase in the investments in the infrastructure of the autonomy. Here we can talk about a segment of the road along Avdarma that is an attraction not only for us but also for the southern part of the Republic of Moldova. The Government decided to allocate for this road 5 million MDL the last year and another 20 million this year.

Last but not least, we are glad that after the last approval of the methodology of the allocation of financial resources for the maintenance of local roads, for the first time ever, Gagauzia will receive over 30 million MDL, of which equal amounts will be distributed to communities, while part of money will remain in the regional budget in order to rehabilitate the regional roads. This is a step forward and we hope to cooperate even more closely with the Chisinau Government in the future.

Last but not least, it was also important to create the Agency for Regional Development in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, which hadn't been created after the approval of the Law on the Development of the Regions. In 2016 we started the activity of this agency and there are already five projects that will be carried out at the regional level and will get financing from the National Fund for Regional Development in the amount of more than 60 million MDL.

We are working very actively with donors. We have support programmes from the European Union, we also have support programmes for the

social infrastructure from the Turkish Government through the TIKA Agency, we work with other donor institutions, and we are having some social and humanitarian projects with the Russian Federation. We are trying to get as much extra-budgetary funds as possible, as it is obvious that the budget sources are permanently limited.

■ **Lina Grâu:** You mentioned that you are trying to focus on investments. What investments do you have and where did they come from?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** Most of investments come from our own private sources - that is, local investors. Last but not least, we are talking about investments coming from the European Union. We have a big Romanian company. We have Turkish investors that are mainly active in the light industry – the largest company is Alternative Style that has four factories in the textile sector and employs more than 1500 people.

So most of the investments are from Turkey and the EU. In the early 2000s there were Russian investments in the region – mostly in wineries. In the future, we would like to capitalize on the trend that exists at the national level in the wiring industry and production of spare parts for cars. And we are having quite an interesting programme in this area - we are working with the Moldovan Investment and Export Promotion Organisation (MIEPO) and with a GIZ team.

■ **Lina Grâu:** You also mentioned the foreign projects and grants coming to the Gagauz region. What are the areas they are earmarked for? The statistics say that since 2011, the credits and grants from foreign donors have increased approximately fourfold.

■ **Vadim Ceban:** We are also working with the EBRD- we have a large water and sewerage project in the Ciadir-Lunga

district with five communities being part of it. It is a successful 7.5 million Euros project that has proven its effectiveness.

In addition, most of the Turkish investments are in the area of social infrastructure. One of the projects is building a kindergarten and another- rehabilitating a health centre in Comrat for 30 people based on international standards. Also in Comrat we are building a modern high school with the support of the Turkish Government and TIKA Agency.

In addition to this, we have signed a roadmap of 20 projects with TIKA. One of the biggest projects is the water supply system in the town of Vulcanesti of UTA Gagauzia, which amounts to over five million Euros.

We are working also with other donors and development partners. Last year, the EU-funded Start Program worth 6.5 million Euros was launched for UTA Gagauzia and Taraclia in the agricultural and rural business development sectors. The project is successful and we are having already the first results. Several localities in UTA Gagauzia will get funding for one social-cultural and infrastructure unit from this programme in the amount between one and two mln MDL, including the contribution of the regional budget.

■ **Lina Grâu:** The statistics show that after 2011 there has been an increased interest of the EU in the Gagauz autonomy. How do you explain this?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** For many years until now, UTA Gagauzia has been deprived of funds from the national budget, compared to other districts. The recent statistics show that the value of investments per capita from the national budget is much lower in the autonomy than in the neighbouring districts - Hincesti, Cahul and others.



But I think this was caused also by weak communication between the central and regional authorities. I am not saying that anyone is to blame, but I think this has determined the EU and other donors to increase their project portfolio in the region.

I think that also the political factor is an important element after the Republic of Moldova signed the Association Agreement with the European Union.

■ **Lina Grău:** What do you mean by this?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** I mean that the development of all regions needs to be balanced in order to be able to cope with the challenges arising from the Association Agreement, including in the area of regional development. The Agreement has a chapter on regional development that provides for a balanced development of each region in relation to the country average - this is also important for the development partners.

■ **Lina Grău:** Mr Ceban, this means that the EU is de facto an advocate of the autonomy and a supporter of the social projects in the region that is interested in raising the living standards. On the other hand, we know that the Bashkan, Irina Vlah, had some rather tough statements about the EU, saying the autonomy does not support the European integration model of the Republic of Moldova and that she is in favour of the Russian-oriented development vector. How can one understand these two realities?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** The reality on the ground is that our basic objective is the social and economic development of the region. If the projects are implemented by different donors and they are aimed at raising the standard of living of citizens, we are ready to work with anyone, including the EU and other development partners.

On the other hand, we are saying that the relations with our traditional partners must not be broken. We can

have very good relations with Turkey, Russia, and CIS countries, which are actually the basic consumers of our products. It has been historically established that the region is predominantly agrarian and there are at least 15 wineries that traditionally export wines to the Eastern markets. And we cannot fail to take this into account, because if we don't develop this sector, we cannot say that we have a regional economy.

On the other hand, I do not want to enter into geopolitical talks. We have the results of the consultative referendum that took place in 2014 within which the citizens of the Republic of Moldova who live in the autonomous region have expressed their opinion regarding the external integration. But it is only a consultative referendum. For us it is important that the Republic of Moldova be independent, sovereign and comply with the Law approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova in 1994 on the special legal status of Gagauzia.

■ **Lina Grău:** You have worked for a long time in the Government of Chisinau and now you are working for the autonomy executive. The 2014 referendum you have referred to was somehow a culmination of the existent tensions between Chisinau and Comrat. What were the causes of these tensions and do you think the dialogue between Chisinau and Comrat has improved?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** I think the cause of the tensions was the lack of communication. The second reason is that here live the same citizens of the Republic of Moldova as in other regions, but no one communicated with them, while the rights and powers of the autonomy were permanently infringed upon by Chisinau. We have strongly felt this here.

The Government teams, whatever they have been, have acted more as firefighters in order to stave off certain outbreaks and problems, instead of

having a concrete plan of reforms to be heard and brought to the attention of people.

And the fact that these issues have persisted for 20 years have created a critical mass of problems that led to the referendum in 2014.

In my opinion, there is another problem that should be of concern to the central Government and that has to do with learning the official language - be it called Romanian or Moldovan. And the second aspect, it is very important for us to study our native language- the Gagauz language. In addition, any reform in the central and regional public administration should be consulted. We don't want to hear any more that one or another service that has worked here for decades has been liquidated or reorganized without taking into account the opinion of the authorities in the region.

■ **Lina Grău:** Mr. Ceban, it is always when speaking of the separatist phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova, after Transnistria, that they mention the Gagauz autonomy. I have heard more and more foreign experts lately talking about the fact that the Gagauz autonomy could be turned into a successful model. Do you think there is potential for Gagauzia to become a kind of peaceful and efficient solution to a separatist conflict in Southeast Europe?

■ **Vadim Ceban:** Yes, I think so. This phenomenon and this model can serve as example for regulating such kind of conflicts. Obviously we are not saying that our example is an ideal one. And we see that there are problems that have were not solved in the 1990s, 2000 and, respectively, they still persist. But as an example of strengthening the society and national consensus between two ethnicities within a state - why not? It can be used. And we are ready to contribute to this process. But obviously, there must be understanding at the country, Parliament and Government levels, but also there must be a national consensus.



Veaceslav Berbeca: Even if there is tension between Comrat and Chisinau, we cannot talk about separatism

Veaceslav Berbeca, an expert with IDIS Viitorul, says the Russian Federation has a huge influence on the Gagauz autonomy, but even if there is tension between the central and Comrat authorities, we cannot talk about separatism in the case of Gagauzia- Comrat is only trying to attract attention and obtain more funds. But a fair administration of the autonomy would help Chisinau in the negotiations on the Transnistrian settlement, thinks Veaceslav Berbeca.

■ **Lina Grâu:** The statistics say that the Gagauzian autonomy is one of the poorest regions of the Republic of Moldova in terms of population's income. How do you explain this?

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** There are several explanations for this situation. Firstly, in this region, certain branches of industry have not been developed even in the USSR. Another aspect is that the Gagauz region predominantly focuses on agricultural products that produce less value than the services or industry.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Statistics show that in recent years the amount of credits and grants provided to the Gagauz autonomy has increased significantly. Where does the funding come from and for what areas?

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** Indeed, the number of projects has increased and most of them come from the EU. Turkey, of course, is one of the most important partners of the Gagauz Autonomous Region. In addition, there are several

EU states that provide assistance and grants. It is about infrastructure and agriculture - these are the areas most targeted by these grants. For example, the Government of Romania has provided grants for the renovation of kindergartens in the region. It is also about sewerage, water supply systems, and public services.

■ **Lina Grâu:** We see that a significant part of the donations and grants come from the EU. However, the Comrat authorities, including the Bashkan, say that the strategic course of the Gagauz autonomy is towards Russia and the Eurasian Union. How do you explain this? And how can this element of separatism that existed in the early 1990s be overcome? They tried to solve the problem, but it seems it couldn't be totally resolved.

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** However, I would like to say that in their statements, the Gagauz authorities have been actually trying to point out that they will be paying great attention to their relationship with the Russian Federation and that this relationship is a priority for the Executive Committee of the Autonomous Region. There are several explanations for that. One basic point is that most of the citizens living in this region are pro-Russians. Many of them work in the Russian Federation and this connection marks their foreign policy options when they have to choose between the East and the West.

The second reason is that this region is Russian speaking. And when we talk about the influence of the Russian media we have to understand that it is very big. The Russian media is overwhelming in this region, which is why we can understand this attitude of the citizens of this region. Unfortunately, very few speak Romanian language and the few TV stations in Romanian language are not popular there. This is how we can explain the big influence of the Russian Federation whose messages about the

EU and the West are well known.

And obviously, taking into account these options for the residents of the region, the politicians in Gagauzia are clinging to these approaches and attitude. This is the explanation why the leaders of the region are always trying to obtain political dividends on the pro-Russian attitude of the Gagauz people.

■ **Lina Grău:** I have heard several voices saying that the investments that have come from the European Union in the Gagauz autonomy in recent years and this particular attention paid to the autonomy comes from the desire to create a positive precedent in Gagauzia for the resolution of separatist conflicts, including for the Transnistrian one. Do you think it is possible to produce a “success story” in Gagauzia of solving separatism problems?

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** I would, however, delineate the situation in the Gagauz region of what we have in the Transnistrian region. These are two totally different issues and I do not think we should put them in the same basket, because the Gagauz politicians, every time they take a harder stance on what is happening in Chisinau, they point out that through their actions they are not trying to put separatism forward, but on the contrary, they are trying to make Chisinau pay more attention to their problems.

Even though there is tension between Gagauz autonomy and central authorities, we can't talk about separatism in this case. Yes, there are indeed acts of intimidation, blackmail, but this has been rather the message of some radical politician than a permanent approach by the authorities in this region.

Getting back to your question, I would like to say that one of the most often cited arguments as to the relations

between Chisinau and the Gagauz authorities is that Chisinau should abide by the 1994 Law on the special status of the region and if it complies with this law and supports the Gagauz autonomy, we will send a signal to the Transnistrian region that we have not only granted this status of autonomy to Gagauzia but also respect it. The central authorities of the Republic of Moldova declared many times that they would grant a special status to the Transnistrian region. Here we can invoke this parallel - once we have granted a certain status to the autonomous region and respect it, this can be an advantage for the Republic of Moldova in its relations with the Transnistrian region, when we are talking about granting a special status that would be functional as well.

■ **Lina Grău:** The working group that was created in Chisinau and Comrat for communication purposes at the legislative level, how efficient is it? Is it necessary and can we expect concrete results?

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** It is definitely necessary. Such working groups should exist and work, because they are non-personalized working groups that have representatives of the Gagauz People's Assembly and the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova that together have to take decisions on the complicated problems in the relations between the central authorities and Gagauz autonomy. There are many issues to be discussed and resolved, which is why such a working group is important.

Regarding its functioning, we can give it a mark between 6 and 7 out of 10, because the very existence of a group is a positive thing. It has met many times and adopted over 20 decisions that are recommendatory. The problem is different - even if this working group exists and has adopted recommendations, the latter have not become draft laws. There are

just recommendations by the Gagauz authorities aimed at resolving certain disputes. The fact that they have not become laws is a drawback of this working group as its functionality is questionable. People are wondering how efficient and functional this working group is if it hasn't produced any concrete results. And this is a big problem.

The second issue is that this working group has not met since June 2016. No meetings took place, no decisions have been taken. And this again is a big problem because this big break is not helping to resolve the disagreements and misunderstandings between the central and Gagauz authorities. However, there are quite a lot of misunderstandings, most of them having to do with powers and attributions.

The Law on the Special Status of Gagauz Autonomy from 1994 is rather old, it has not been amended for 23 years. The law is very vague and leaves room for interpretations, which is why disagreements arise between Chisinau and Comrat, and the Gagauz authorities say that Chisinau does not respect the attributions and competences of the Gagauz autonomy.

■ **Lina Grău:** In your view, which would be the few steps that could lead to an improvement of the situation in Gagauzia on the one hand and, on the other hand, to the removal of this issue from the public agenda, including the associations between the Gagauzian autonomy and the separatist phenomenon? Because we see that after more than 20 years, we still cannot talk in the Republic of Moldova about a unitary space – informational, cultural, etc.

■ **Veaceslav Berbeca:** I agree with what you are saying. Several measures should be taken to resolve this issue.

From my point of view, it would be very good for this working group to develop and turn into a permanent committee consisting of experts who know very well the legal and economic issues, because the proposed solutions depend very much on the quality of the participating experts.

And, in my view, the delimitation of competencies is paramount. If the document established in a clearer way the limits and competencies of the Gagauz autonomy, this would solve many problems. Political will is needed in this case and it should come both from the Gagauz autonomy and Chisinau. Because as long as we follow the 1994 law that has not been changed for a long time and which is an obsolete law, tensions will emerge permanently.

In addition, Chisinau should pay attention to other issues related to the situation in the Gagauz autonomy. If we are talking about the economic aspects, the Gagauz autonomy should not consider itself as being neglected by Chisinau from the economic and financial perspective, because more than half of the autonomy budget is transfers

from the state budget. A lot of fees and taxes that are collected in the region remain one hundred percent in the Gagauz autonomy.

There are also different state organizations that allocate funds for different projects in the Gagauz region, and here I refer, for example, to the National Regional Development Fund. In January 2016, the programme document of this Fund was adopted, which provides for allocation of money for five regional development projects for the Gagauz autonomy. This is the first time that money for UTA Gagauzia will be allocated to the National Regional Development Fund. There are other projects, for example in agriculture. So money is being allocated, therefore we cannot talk about lack of attention from Chisinau.

Another thing that is being discussed and which is a stringent need is the Romanian language. Chisinau should pay more attention to teaching the Romanian language in this region. This problem has been left unresolved and without much attention which has generated tension. Also the

baccalaureate was a big problem a few years ago, and secondly, if you do not know Romanian it is harder to integrate into the society of the Republic of Moldova. Even the people in the autonomy posed the problem of teaching Romanian in schools. This would obviously be a good step towards the reintegration of this region into the society of the Republic of Moldova.

Obviously, the geopolitical factor is also important. We know that the Russian Federation is very active in this region—more informationally and politically than financially. But Russia also indirectly supported the region. Several years in a row, when the Moldovan agricultural products were banned in Russia, restrictions were lifted for some companies in the Gagauz region. Here, obviously, the Russian Federation applied a discriminatory approach and we understand that this feeds the pro-Russian spirits from the Republic of Moldova. It was, of course, an economic support, but the Russian Federation was pursuing its goals of supporting the pro-Russian sentiments in the Gagauz region.

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