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CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE REFERENDA FROM UTA GAGAUZ-YERI

Policy Brief



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POLICY BRIEF

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Veaceslav Berbeca



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INTRODUCTION

On February 2nd, 2014, two referenda took place in the Administrative-Territorial Unit Gagauz-Yeri (UTAG Gagauzia) - one of consultative and the other one of “legislative” character. In the first case, the residents of Gagauzia were called to cast their votes over the foreign policy vector of the Republic of Moldova and namely, to say if they are in favour of the country joining the European Union or the Russia- Belorussia- Kazakhstan Customs Union. In the second case, the citizens of the region had to say if they agree that the Gagauz autonomy exercises its right to the external self-determination in case the Republic of Moldova loses its independence.

The decisions of the Popular Assembly of UTA Gagauz-Yeri (APG) from November 27, 2013, on the organisation of these referenda have been contested in the Comrat Court, which on December 5th, issued an irrevocable ruling which cancelled the decisions adopted by the Popular Assembly. The court decision could be contested in the Court of Appeal within 30 days.

On January 31st, the Popular Assembly adopted a decision on contesting of the Comrat Court decision in the superior legal bodies. Also, the Gagauz deputies voted once again for the organisation of the referenda on February 2nd. The purpose of this vote by the local legislative body was to maintain under the guise of legality, from the procedural point of view, the organisation of the referenda until the final decision of the superior legal bodies. Thus, in total, 18 deputies voted for maintaining the APG decisions from January 31st in force. In the meantime, before the final legal decision was adopted, both referenda had been successfully organised. According to the data provided by the Comrat authorities, the participation rate in the referenda was 70% of the eligible voting population of the region.

About 98,47% voted for the Russia- Belorussia- Kazakhstan Customs Union, while for the European Union- only 2.57%. Also, 98,09% of the participants in the referendum voted for the right to external self-determination. According to the information provided by the interviewees, the high participation rate at the referenda was guaranteed by the extensive use of

administrative resources. Even if the high participation rate is doubtful¹, and the organisation of the two referenda is illegal, the referenda are an accomplished fact which creates political discomfort and difficulties for the power in Chisinau.

It is important to mention that the referenda problem is a continuation and reflection of the fight between the main political forces in the Gagauz autonomy: the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) and the supporters of Mihail Formuzal, the Bashkan (governor) of UTA Gagauz-Yeri. In this context, there can be identified three types of dissensions involving directly or indirectly the Gagauz autonomy. First, it is about a regional conflict regarding the fight between the most influential political formations over the position of the governor in the region that will be elected at the end of 2014 and over the political influence in the region in general. Secondly, we refer to the divergences between the Comrat leaders and the Moldovan central authorities over the delimitation of competencies between the centre and the region. This problem is amplified by the economic factor: the dissensions over the extension or the income categories of the central budget of the autonomous unit with special status as well as over the transfer of more funds for capital investments. And finally, the last form of the conflict derives out of the

¹ The figures on the participation in the voting in Gagauzia are manipulative, <http://www.ipn.md/ro/politica/59796>

tactics of contesting the policies of the ruling coalition in Gagauzia, used by the communists from Gagauzia that profited skilfully from the situation in the region. All these types of conflict took the form of the two referenda which is a blow both over the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova and the ruling coalition.

A separate issue is the role of the Russian Federation in the organisation of the referenda. There are several facts determining the public opinion to think that it was Moscow which had orchestrated this. In this case, reference is made to the meeting between the Russian politician Dmitri Rogozin and the Gagauz Bashkan Mihail Formuza². Financing of the referendum by a Russian businessman is another sign indicating at

² <http://unimedia.info/stiri/rogozin-incita-iar-spiritele-ce-i-a-spus-emisarul-rus-lui-Sevciuk-50671.html>

a possible involvement of Russia in the events from Gagauzia³. The presence in Gagauzia during the referenda of Roman Hudiakov on February 2nd, deputy in the State Duma of the Russian Federation, is another indication fuelling this supposition.⁴

To deny the interference of Moscow in these events is as difficult as to demonstrate a definite involvement of the Russian Federation in the organisation of the referenda in the autonomous region of Gagauzia. Therefore, in our analysis, we focused on the evident internal implications which played an essential role in the organisation of the events from February 2nd.

³ <http://www.prime.md/rom/news/social/item5594/>

⁴ http://www.publika.md/referendumurile-de-la-comrat-au-fost-monitorizate-de-observatori-straini--care-nu-aveau-acreditarea-ccc-video_1792961.html

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN GAGAUZIA

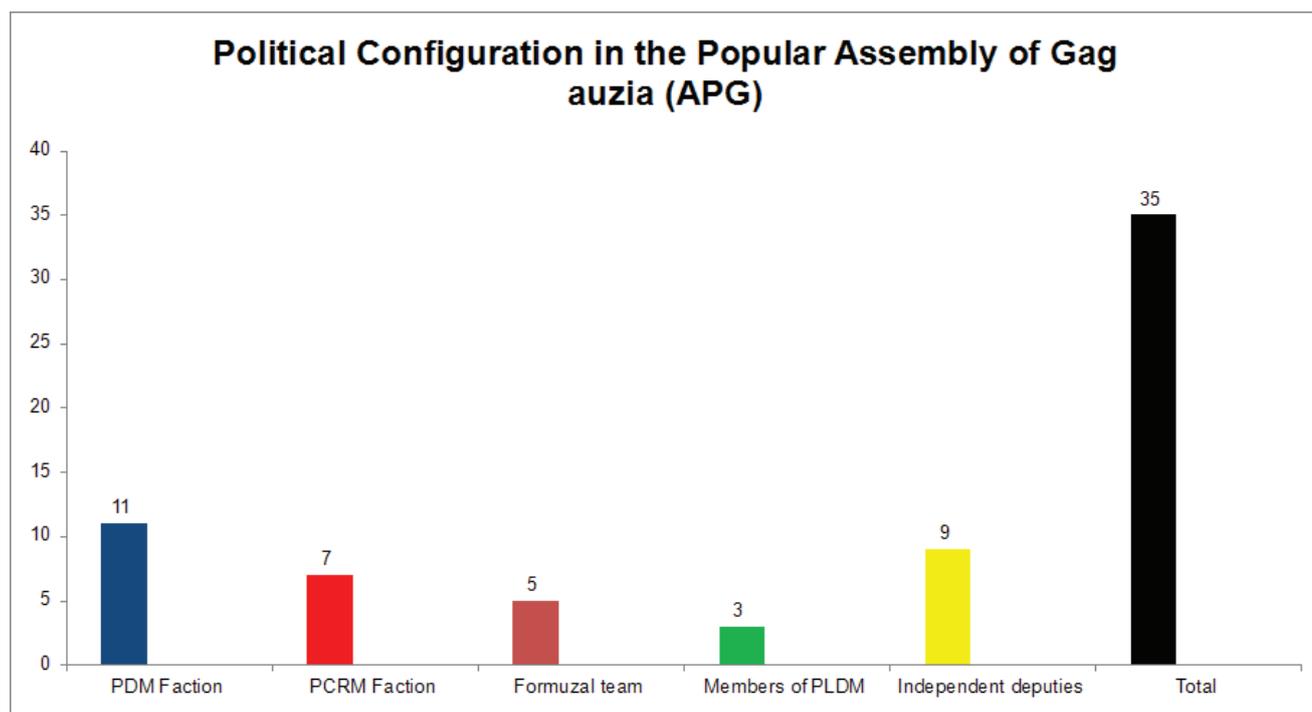
All these three forms of conflict have evolved simultaneously over the last two years. At different stages, one or another type of conflict accentuated, however the politicians in Comrat have always showed solidarity in one matter- the need to criticize Chisinau for the alleged non-observance by the central authorities of the special legal status of the Gagauz autonomy. In all the other cases, each political formation followed its political interest in the region.

Mention should be made that only two political factions are active in the APG- that of the PDM formed of 16 deputies and which reduced to 11 deputies after the changes from February 13th, 2014 in this party; and that of the PCRPM composed of 7 deputies. Initially, also the PLDM had a faction but given the necessary minimum of 5 deputies to create a faction, it was dissolved after two deputies had left the faction. There are also 5 representatives of Formuzal's team who did not reunite in a faction. After the latest events connected with the

decision of the PDM Political Council, there are now 9 independent deputies.

The most influential PDM deputies in the Popular Assembly are Demian Caraseni and Aleksandr Tarnavschi; PCRPM deputies- Roman Tiutin and Gheorghii Leiciu; Mihail's Formuzal team - Fiodor Gagauz and Victor Petrioglo; PLDM - Nikolai Ormanji. The most important deputies from among the independent ones are Dmitri Konstantinov, Ivan Burgudji and Serghei Cimpoieș.

Speaking about the confrontation between the team of Nikolai Dudoglo, the PDM leader in the autonomous region and Mihail Formuzal, the head of the UTAG executive and chairman of the Party of Regions of Moldova, mention should be made that this political competitiveness over the position of governor had impacted the relations between the teams led by the respective politicians. The disputes intensified after the elections in the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia



(AGP) from September 2012, when 15 independent deputies joined the PDM forming thus a new faction in the legislative body of the autonomy. Thus, the entire year 2013 has been marked by conflicts between the legislative body dominated by the PDM deputies and the Bashkan Mihail Formuzal.

Two accusations have been brought against the latter: 1 – the issue of the misappropriation of funds from the Russian humanitarian aid has been resumed; 2- the Bashkan has been accused of abuse of power and of non-observance of the APG decisions. Thus, through the decision no. 56-VII/V from March 12th, 2013, of the Gagauz legislative body, there was created a control commission which had to look into the law violations and abuse of power by the Governor Mihail Formuzal. The first meeting of the special commission took place on April 23, 2013. The initiative of a group of deputies on starting the procedure of the Bashkan's dismissal was one of the issues addressed by this commission⁵.

Later, under one form or another, the accusations against Mihail Formuzal have continued. We will focus below on some of the accusations and methods of the political fight against the Bashkan which have been used especially by the representatives of the Democratic Party in the Gagauz autonomy.

On July 26, 2013, the APG adopted a decision requesting the Governor to come up with information on the execution of the decision on the fulfilment of special measures for reimbursement of the humanitarian aid from the reserve fund till September 2013⁶. On November 11, 2013, the chairman of the APG, Dmitri Konstantinov, submitted a letter to the prosecutor of the UTA Gagauz-Yeri, requesting to conduct an investigation on the illegal actions by the Bashkan Mihail Formuzal. After three days, on November 14, 2013, the chairman of the Gagauz legislative body organised a briefing bringing severe accusations against the Governor.

Particularly, Konstantinov urged Formuzal „to start working for the benefit of the residents of the autonomous

region and stop the hysterics and the political games”⁷. Among other things, Mihail Formuzal was accused of not intervening in due time to support the interests of the autonomy in the case of creation in spring last year under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice, of a working group whose purpose was to analyse the legislation on the special status of the Gagauz autonomy. According to the Comrat leaders, the purpose of the working group was to cancel the special rights and competences of the UTA Gagauz-Yeri. Also the Bashkan was reproached for the fact that being a member of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, neglected the intention of the central authorities to reduce by 50% the direct incomes of the autonomous region from VAT and excise taxes for the budgetary year 2014 and for not having taken a position on the issue of the use of the Romanian language on the territory of Gagauzia. At the same time, Formuzal's inactivity is balanced against the efficiency of the PDM members who said they had resolved the respective issues.

The conflict culminated on November 15, 2013, during a special meeting of the APG, when the issue of Formuzal's dismissal was addressed. As a result of the secret voting, 19 out of 20 deputies who participated in this exercise –mainly members of the Democratic Party- voted for dismissal of the current Governor of UTA Gagauz-Yeri. Nevertheless, the Bashkan dismissal did not take place for lack of necessary votes (2/3). The political offensive of the PDM has attained only part of its objectives through the dismissal that day with 25 out of 30 votes, of the Executive Committee of the autonomous region. This was possible including due to the communists' participation in the voting process.

Each time, Mihail Formuzal, denied vehemently the accusations of misappropriation of the humanitarian aid from the reserve fund. Actually, the Bashkan regards this scandal from a different angle. He states that at the basis of all accusations is the “inadequate reaction of certain pro-Romanian forces from Chisinau which got irritated at the close links between the Gagauz autonomy and several twin regions of the Russian Federation which provided various humanitarian aid to the citizens of Gagauzia”⁸. Therefore, according to Mihail Formuzal,

⁵ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/140-ozloupotrebleniyakh-vlastyu-glavoj-gagauzii>

⁶ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/310-spetsialnoe-zasedanie-nsg-ot-26-10-2013-goda>

⁷ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/315-predsdatel-nsg-provel-brifing>

⁸ Report of the Executive Committee of Gagauzia on the allocation

„being afraid of the strengthening of Gagauzia’s potential, these forces found allies in the region and given the compromising materials they had against them, the latter were convinced to collaborate”⁹. From this report, it appears that because of this erroneous information regarding the misappropriation of humanitarian aid, Gagauzia lost the chance to benefit from an annual material aid in the amount of 50 mln MDL from the Russian Federation, of which 25 mln MDL had to be distributed to the communities for social projects, based on the number of the population. The other amount had to be distributed to the pensioners in the region as supplement to the pensions, in order to neutralise the increase in the price of the energy resources.

The Bashkan’s explanations base on three main pillars. It is about: first, the use of the anti-Romanian rhetoric in the political fight with the representatives of the Democratic Party from Gagauzia; second, the existence of the possibility of the annual humanitarian aid of 50 mln MDL- this is difficult to prove but certainly is very popular with the citizens of the region; third, the reference to the existence of other agreements with the twin regions of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, Mihail Formuzal sustains there are two more reasons which explain the conflict between him and the PDM representatives. First, this is allegedly about his statement from August 2001, when he advised Vlad Filat during a visit of the latter in Ceadir Lunga, to run for the position of president in order to put an end to the instability in the country. According to the Bashkan, his attitude which derived exclusively from his wish to come up with a solution to the problem of election of the head of state, has annoyed the leadership of the Democratic Party. Another reason was the resistance of Mihai Formuzal against the attempts of the PDM leadership to influence several processes in the region- for example, appointment to important positions in UTA Gagauz-Yeri of several persons close to the local representatives of this party. Thus, the conflict appeared to have started as a result of the fact that the Bashkan did not want to conform to the pressure and interests of the PDM in the region.

of humanitarian aid in the form of diesel oil and cereals, provided by the twin regions of the Russian Federation, http://www.gagauzia.md/public/files/2013/ocet_gumanitarnaea_pomosh.pdf

⁹ ibidem

The communist representatives have also followed their interests in the region. They have skilfully profited from the conflicts between Formuzal’s and Dudoglo’s teams, trying to reach two fundamental objectives: strengthening their position in UTA Gagauz-Yeri before the general parliamentary elections and also before the local governor elections from the end of 2014 and undermining the influence in the region of the ruling coalition parties.

Having been guided by these two major objectives, the communists have actively supported the accusations of misappropriation of the humanitarian aid funds brought by the PDM against the governor, including the accusation of abuse of power and non-observance of the APG decisions. Moreover, the communists from Gagauzia voted for the dismissal of the Executive Committee of the region but did not participate in the voting of the no-confidence motion against the Bashkan.

Through this movement, they wanted to show that they did not have a common agenda with the Bashkan. At the same time, the communists understand that during the next elections for the governor of the region, they could benefit from the support of Formuzal’s team in case the candidate supported by the current Bashkan does not get to the second round. Finally, the Gagauz communists cannot go together with the democrats against the governor because of the political colour. Even if the PDM members in the region have very many times different positions than the policy run by the Chisinau leaders, they are anyway regarded as an extension of the ruling coalition in the autonomous region. For this reason, the Gagauz communists and Formuzal’s team (belonging to the Party of Regions) are trying to maintain power balance in relation to the democrats’ deputies in the APG.

In this context, the landscape of political forces in the region before the governor elections that will take place at the end of this year is rather interesting. In the perspective of these elections, Dudoglo’s position does not seem to be as certain as it was one year ago. The competitors of the current mayor of Comrat think he had made several serious mistakes which could create obstacles to him in his running for the governor of the region. Firstly, mention should be made that the negative image of the

ruling coalition is being projected on Dudoglo affecting his popularity in the autonomous region. Secondly, they are saying Dudoglo appointed PDM representatives in all the institutions subordinated to this party. Two of the institutions in question are SE “Posta Moldovei” and SE “Moldtelecom”. These appointments have been allegedly made without taking into account professionalism criteria. And finally, Dudoglo has played an important role in the organisation of the participation of Gagauz people in the meeting on the support to the European integration of the Republic of Moldova which took place on November 3rd, 2013, in Chisinau.

At the same time, even if PCRM has not nominated yet its candidacy for the position of Bashkan, the likelihood that Irina Vlah will be the communists’ option is very high. Mention should be made that Irina Vlah got

involved in the governor elections at the end of the elections campaign and obtained nearly one third of the votes, by only several hundred votes less than Nikolai Dudoglo who got to the second round together with Mihail Formuzal. This time, Irina’s Vlah chances seem to be even higher in case she is nominated as candidate for Bashkan by the PCRM. This is also due to the position of the current Governor who is angry with the ruling coalition from Chisinau for not having supported him in the conflict with the PDM representatives from the Gagauz autonomy. Respectively, in case Dudoglo and the communist candidate get to the second round, we can expect that Formuzal’s team will support the PCRM candidate. The victory of Irina Vlah would be a premiere in the history of the Bashkan elections in the region, removing the usual cliché that no woman will ever win this position in Gagauzia.

FROM AN INTERNAL CONFLICT TO A CONFLICT WITH CHISINAU

The idea of organising the two referenda which took place in the Gagauz autonomous region on February 2nd is not new. The crucial question in this context is “what were the main reasons for determining all the political formations in the region to support the idea of the referenda acting together in a moment when the internal fight seemed to have become irreversible”.

Mention should be made that the PCRM faction from the Gagauz legislative registered an initiative on the organisation of a consultative referendum in the region back on November 30th, 2012. The key question then was the foreign policy vector of the Republic of Moldova: the European Union or the Russia-Belorussia-Kazakhstan Customs Union. The question suggested by the communists was as following: “Do you agree to authorise the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia to request the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova to organise a legislative national referendum on joining the Russia-Belorussia-Kazakhstan Customs Union?”¹⁰.

During that first attempt, the situation related to the APG vote on the organisation of the referendum was rather confused. Finally, the then speaker of Parliament Marian Lupu stated that the Gagauz deputies had voted only for examining the initiative by the permanent commissions of the Chisinau legislative. The former speaker mentioned his statements was based on the public declarations of the chairman of the Popular Assembly, Dmitri Konstantinov, who said the PCRM was lying about the APG unanimous vote in favour of organising the referendum¹¹.

¹⁰ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/323-referendumu-byt>

¹¹ http://www.publika.md/pcrm--adunarea-populara-a-gagauziei-este-supusa-presiunilor--ce-spune-marian-lupu-video_1157171.html

In May 2013, a group of deputies from the PDM faction of the APG registered two new initiatives on the organisation of referenda. Also, the citizens in the region had to express their views regarding the foreign vector of the Republic of Moldova as well as in relation to the right to external self-determination of the Gagauz autonomous region in case the Republic of Moldova loses its independence. The deputy Ion Burgundji, who at that time was part of the democratic faction of the APG, played an important role in the development of the initiatives.

And finally, on October 2013, the Governor of the UTA Gagauz-Yeri, Mihail Formuzal, submitted to the Comrat legislative body his own initiative on the organisation of a consultative referendum in the region on the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

Thus, starting with 2012, in UTA Gagauz-Yeri, there have been developed and submitted three initiatives regarding the foreign policy vector of the Republic of Moldova and all of them were coming from the most important political formations in the autonomous region. On November 27th, 2013, the Popular Assembly adopted unanimously, by nominal vote, a resolution regarding the organisation of the two referenda. This unanimous decision was acclaimed by all the Gagauz deputies¹².

The parties represented in the Popular Assembly voted for the organisation of the referenda because the politicians in the region know the favourable attitude of the Gagauz people towards getting closer to the Russian Federation. As one of the Gagauz politicians put it “it

¹² <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/323-referendumu-byt>

would have been a political suicide if any of the political formations had had a different attitude towards the organisation of referenda”.

It is evident that each political formation which entered this game had more or less a clear interest when it came up with the initiative of organising the consultative or legislative referenda. The communists, being the most important opposition party in Chisinau, are very influential in Gagauzia as well. They were the first who came up with the idea of organising the referendum and insisted several times that this project is voted. As mentioned above, the issue in question has been discussed in the APG, the communists affirming that all the Gagauz deputies voted unanimously. Over the entire 2013, the Gagauz communists have organised an active campaign for the organisation of a referendum on the foreign policy vector of the Republic of Moldova, thus putting an enormous pressure on the other political formations as well.

Mention should be made that each political formation played an important role in the adoption of the decision on the organisation of the two referenda. The most confused, probably, is the situation of the democrats in the region. Let us remind you that they had had their own initiative on the foreign policy vector, developed by Ivan Burgundji, who at the time of the project registration was member of the PDM faction of the APG. The way this initiative was supported as well as the final results, make us think that the democrats got into a trap which was set with their own and direct participation. More exactly, the general impression is that the PDM representatives in the autonomous region played a double game¹³. On one hand, they tried to speculate the idea of the referendum in their conflict with the central authorities hoping to win the battle referring to their claims of respecting the competencies of the Gagauz autonomy. In addition to that, the local democrats have speculated the Russophile card being aware of the fact that such an attitude would be supported by the Gagauz people. On the other hand, the local democrats from the APG have hindered on many occasions the final decision on the organisation of the referenda and have been the main promoters in the region of the position of the ruling coalition. Thus,

¹³ This general impression bases on the interviews with the politicians and NGO representatives in the region

the position of the PDM leaders in Gagauzia was in compliance with the general line of the party at the national level. This balance between the two extremes have culminated in the decision to support the two referenda which impacted the image of the Democratic Party both in the autonomous region and in the country.

The decision of the PDM Political Council from February 2013, on the dismissal of four party members and APG deputies, including of the chairman of the Popular Assembly Dmitri Konstantinov, for the vote from January 31st, 2014, aims at accrediting the idea that the democratic leaders from Chisinau did not support the vote of their party colleagues from the Gagauz legislative body on the organisation of the referenda¹⁴. Yet, we are wondering why the sanctions of the PDM Political Council have been selective in relation to the APG party members and applied only to the people who participated in the voting process from January 31st, 2014? We cannot but conclude that it is extremely dangerous and absolutely irrational to expel all the deputies of the APG who participated in the voting from November 27th for this would mean to remain without any faction and representatives in the Comrat legislative body before the elections from 2014.

This situation leads to the following conclusions. The democrats believed probably, that the referenda organisation activities could be stopped by legal means as well as that they would manage to convince the Gagauz colleagues not to participate in the voting when the decision of the Comrat court was contested and not to adopt a new decision on the organisation of referenda.

As mentioned above, the decision on the organisation of the two referenda has been declared illegal and the “re-voting” was but a trick aimed at conferring the referenda the appearance of having observed the legal procedures. One of the main reasons invoked by the PDM leadership was violation of the party discipline by the members expelled¹⁵. This accusation makes us think at the way these deputies became members of PDM as they had initially been elected as independent candidates and only

¹⁴ <http://trm.md/ro/politic/patru-membri-pdm-din-gagauzia-au-fost-exclu-i-din-forma-iune/>

¹⁵ http://www.publika.md/emisiuni/fabrika_411.html#editia2821421

after joined the democrats. This illness of the Moldovan politics – to pass from one party into another or become a party member from an independent deputy- proves the conjuncturalism of these options.

In general, there are several versions explaining exactly the moment when all the conditions were met and the turning point of was made for the decision on organizing the referenda.

The first is that the democrats, promoting simultaneously two different directions, have lost control over the situation in the autonomous region, their initiative being taken over by other political formations. This allowed the Bashkan Mihail Formuzal to act strategically on October 1st, 2013, and call to organise the referenda. In this moment, the democrats, having found themselves in a trap, stopped the double game, having to support the idea of the referenda in order to keep their electorate.

The second version which does not contradict or exclude the first one- is that, understanding that the refusal to support the idea of the referenda will affect negatively the position of the party in the region, the PDM members have decided collectively to participate in the voting process in favour of the referenda. The democrats had a decisive role, they having the majority of seats in the APG and being also supported by some of the independent deputies. Now the question is if the Chisinau leaders had tacitly approved of the participation and support by the Gagauz democrats of the referenda idea? Judging by the position of Marian Lupu expressed in an interview given to the “Kommersant” publication, the PDM leaders gave their colleagues in Gagauzia¹⁶ *carte blanche*. Expelling from the party of the four members who are also members of the Parliamentary Assembly (APG), led by Dmitry Konstantinov, even though it was explained as having connection with the referenda, in reality, it was a sanction to those who betrayed Dudoglo and the Democratic Party, having joined unofficially Formuzal’s camp. From the interviews, we can conclude

¹⁶ http://www.noi.md/md/news_id/35766

that Formuzal was provided Russian support for the promotion of his Party of Regions and given this support he attracted the deputies on his side.

The third version says that this process started materialising together with the active involvement of the Bashkan Mihail Formuzal in the promotion of the referenda initiative. As it has been mentioned above, the Governor of the autonomy has his own reasons for being angry with the Government for the attacks he was subject in 2012-2013. The feeling of having been abandoned by Chisinau in his fight with the democrats from the APG and also the need to promote his own party – Party of Regions - determined Formuzal to come up with the initiative of organising the referendum on the foreign policy vector, a fact which has apparently strengthened his position in the autonomous region.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the decision on the organisation of the referenda should be addressed in a larger context and there are at least four factors that being regarded in an inter-relation process, explain how it was adopted. First, the dissatisfaction of the Gagauz leaders with the refusal by Chisinau to extend the competencies of Gagauzia is rather weighty. In this context, we can speak about lack of a clear vision of the central power in relation to UTA Gagauz-Yeri.

Secondly, the serious cases of corruption in the Republic of Moldova served to the Gagauz as a justification for the organisation of the referenda. Thus, the main question formulated by the Gagauz on this issue is as following: “How can those who seriously and regularly violate the law criticize us for not having observed the legislation of the Republic of Moldova in the case of referenda?” ... Thirdly, each political formation promoted its interests in the region taking advantage of the problem of the foreign policy vector which is popular with the public. And finally, the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union and the initialling of the Association Agreement, in the absence of veridical information, have been a bogey for the citizens of the autonomous region.

ARE THE GAGAUZ PEOPLE ANTI-EUROPEAN?

Having been posed this question, the representatives of all the political parties and the civil society, state in unison that the ethnic Gagauz are not anti-European. What is then the explanation in this case of the anti-European vote from February 2nd, 2014?

First, the policies of the ruling coalitions have been associated with the European Union. Several unpopular reforms implemented by the central authorities have been attributed to the European integration process. The reforms in the education and health areas are just some of the policies which provoked contradictory reactions among the Gagauz people. The Anti-discrimination (equal chances) Law has also been subject to severe criticism and regarded as undermining the values and traditions of the Gagauz people in the region.

Another reason is the personnel policy promoted in the region by the representatives of the ruling coalition parties. Mention should be made that this is the opinion of the representatives of the opposition factions which stated that incompetent people had been nominated for important positions in key institutions, the main criterion being established by the algorithm in Chisinau. Also in this case, the European integration process is associated with the actions of the ruling coalition.

Rapprochement to the European Union has stirred up many anti-European reactions because of the embargo imposed by the Russian Federation on the wine exports from the Republic of Moldova. In UTA Gagauz-Yeri, there is a big potential for wine production and respectively the Gagauz leaders complain of important losses because of the restrictions established by Moscow. In the same way, the new Russian immigration policy is ascribed to the getting closer to the European Union. In this context, mention should be made that most of the Gagauz people working abroad are in the Russian Federation and the new restrictions will possibly have

negative impact on the incomes and the social status of the Gagauz families.

Another problem derives from the fact that the informational space in the Gagauz communities is dominated by the mass media of the Russian Federation. And it is a well-known fact that the Russian TV stations are continuously criticizing the realities in the new EU member-states, one of the purposes being to show that the standards of living in Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania, decreased after these countries joined the European Union.

Against this background, failure of the central authorities to explain the Gagauz people the advantages of the European integration is evident. This is also caused by the fact that a small number of the Gagauz people know Romanian and English so as to understand the messages of the Government on the European integration process. At least, according to several politicians and representatives of the civil society in the region, the Chisinau authorities have not even tried to come to communities in Gagauzia and talk to the Gagauz people about the state policies of rapprochement to the EU. A proof in this sense is that during the visit in UTA Gagauz-Yeri on January 22nd, 2014, of the Prime Minister Iurie Leanca and the speaker of Parliament Igor Corman, the two leaders let to understand that they had not managed to create a framework for efficient discussions in order to explain the advantages of the European integration and that they would improve this by the active participation of the state and foreign experts¹⁷.

And finally, the idea of the European integration has been presented as a stage of the unification process with Romania. In this context, mention should be made that during the interviews with representative of different political parties

¹⁷ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/361-22255666444>

in the region, they mentioned that getting closer to the EU is perceived as an intermediary phase which can lead to the dissolution of the present state. These concerns are also present in the informative note accompanying the decision on the legislative referendum, which enlisted the reasons determining the launching of the initiative. Thus the informative note mentions that several political parties and movements, including the Liberal Party, have fixed “the liquidation of the independence of the Moldovan state and its unification with Romania” as a main goal in their programmes registered with the Ministry of Justice¹⁸. In the opinion of the politicians from the Gagauz autonomy, the leadership of the Republic of Moldova should have come up and explained it to the population so as to dispel these concerns. They should have also taken a trenchant attitude toward the unionist statements of the Romanian president Traian Basescu as well as of other local politicians.

As a general conclusion, the state did not have a successful communication and information strategy in the UTA Gagauz-Yeri. Actually, it is not excluded that there is a similar situation in other regions of the Republic of Moldova and that the tensions flared simply up in Gagauzia because of the specifics of the region and of the solid involvement of certain political forces. Where the central authorities did not manage, the lack of information and other real or imaginary problems have been easily made up by an ample campaign of the PCRM which played a determined role in this anti-European offensive.

In the campaign developed by the communists, the European Union has been presented as a space where nobody is waiting for us, while the euro-integration

¹⁸ <http://www.halktoplushu.com/index.php/glavnaia/novosti/325-o-provedenii-zakonodatelnogo-referenduma-ato-gagauziya-ob-otlo-zhenom-statuse-naroda-gagauzii-na-vneshnee-samoopredelenie>

process has been exclusively described from the negative perspective- jobs losses, sharp increase in prices for the energy resource, flooding of the domestic market with products that cannot not be sold in the EU and quotas for the Moldovan products on the European market. More than that, as mentioned above, they have constantly sustained that the idea of the unification with Romania is hidid under the slogan of the European integration. Joining of the Russian-Belorussia-Kazakhstan Customs Union, on the contrary, has been presented only from the positive angle: maintaining jobs, the possibility to trade goods freely, keeping orthodox family traditions and low prices for energy resources. Mention should be made that the anti-European rhetoric of the PCRM has been supported by other political formations which sooner or later have acted in favour of the two referenda.

It is worthwhile mentioning that initially, the process of the Moldovan European integration has been presented as a tale that would never succeed. But when it became clear that our country would initial the Association Agreement with the European Union, while Armenia and Azerbaijan had announced their intention to abandon the Eastern Partnership, and Ukraine had started to balance, the atmosphere in Comrat has changed. So, the firm commitment of the central authorities to advance on the European integration path has generated anti-European sentiments in Gagauzia and determined the decision on the referenda. To remind you, the deputies of the APG voted unanimously for the organisation of the referenda on November 27th, exactly on the eve of the EaP Vilnius Summit from November 28th-29th, 2013. Ultimately, we can affirm that over the last period, the Gagauz people have showed a latent anti-Europeanism, different from the active-Europeanism of the Transnistrian people. And the initialling of the Association Agreement contributed to fact that the latent anti-Europeanism became active.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ The decision of organizing the two referenda should be analysed in a larger context. The inactiveness of Chisinau towards the requests of the Gagauz leaders to settle the issue of the competencies of the autonomous region, as well as the serious corruption cases in the country, have determined the Gagauz people to support insistently the two referenda. Mention should be made that each political formation followed its interests in the region against a tumultuous political climate which preceded the decision on the referenda. Finally, in the situation of several overlapping factors, the Gagauz leaders voted unanimously for the organization of the referenda.
- ▶ All important parties in the region have played an essential role in the referenda process. The goal of the Party of Communists was to strengthen its position in Gagauzia before the national parliamentary elections and governor elections. The communists tried to demonstrate through their actions that the parties of the current ruling coalition are not able to control the political processes in UTA Gagauz-Yeri. In addition to that, the PCRM hopes to trigger a “domino” effect on the whole territory of the Republic of Moldova, based on the Gagauzia model, in order to undermine the position of the current ruling coalition.
- ▶ The actions of the Democratic Party have been probably the most confused over the period since the initiation and adoption of the decision on the organization of the referenda. In December 2012, the leadership of the Popular Assembly hindered the adoption of this decision but in May 2013 it registered a similar initiative of its own. PDM has supported actively the organization of the participation of Gagauz people in the pro-European meeting which took place on November 3rd, 2013, in Chisinau and later, voted for the anti-European referenda in the region. The democrats had also a confused attitude towards the organization on the referenda. In the beginning, the representatives of the Democratic Party from the autonomous region of Gagauzia have been passive observers but later, they got actively involved and supported the two referenda from February 2nd, 2014.
- ▶ The central authorities failed to develop a communication strategy and convince the citizens of Gagauzia of the advantages of the European integration. In the absence of pro-European information available in the Russian language- the dominant language in UTA Gagauz-Yeri despite the fact that the Gagauz and Romanian languages are declared official – the communists took advantage of the weaknesses of the central authorities and promoted an active anti-European campaign. The somehow late attempt by the officials in Chisinau to discuss with the Comrat decision makers has had a revers effect, being perceived as an attempt to exercise pressure on the Gagauz people. Moreover, through their late reaction, the central authorities have tightened their room for manoeuvre. The state institutions had to choose between taking a decision on the referenda or do nothing about it. However, both solutions would have been disadvantageous. On one hand, if it does not take a stance, it means the state has no capacity to apply the legal norms on the entire territory of the country. On the other hand, initiation of legal proceedings for arbitrary actions will most likely have no results because it is difficult to imagine arresting of the representatives of the regional power by the state legal bodies. These measures have stirred up anti-Chisinau sentiments in Gagauzia. The problems and rhetoric of the 1990s have been brought back at the meeting from January 2014 in Comrat where one could here declarations like “we are getting united to fight the enemy” or “our enemy is in Chisinau”.

- ▶ The events from UTA Gagauz-Yeri make us think that de facto, the ruling parties have lost the battle for the Gagauz people's votes before the general parliamentary elections and governor elections. Expelling from the Democratic Party of Moldova of the four members directly involved in the organization of the two referenda is a decision which can be regarded positively at the national level- the people that did not observe the law and the party discipline have been punished. However, this does not offer the certainty that it would bring political capital to the democrats in the region. On the contrary, it could have a reverse effect- those punished by Chisinau may be regarded as heroes in Gagauzia. The participation of the four Gagauz members of the APG in the session from January 31st, 2014, leads us to the conclusion that the four expelled members accepted to play on Formuzal side because otherwise they would not have had the quorum in the APG.
- ▶ It is interesting to note that most of the people interviewed stressed the idea that Formuzal, who seemed at one time to have lost the political battle, obtained victory in this confrontation. This conclusion seems to be supported by the events related to the exclusion of those 4 former Democrats who apparently joined Formuzal camp and Dudoglo's statement who said that "the members expelled had violated the party discipline, betrayed the team with the intention to destroy it and tried to dismiss from office the deputy chairmen of the Popular Assembly and the chairmen of the parliamentary committees."¹⁹
- ▶ If is to ignore the legal consequences of these referenda, we should mention that the Gagauz politicians, nolens-volens, have succeeded in drawing the attention of the society and of foreign partners to the situation in the autonomous region. Thus, no matter what the purpose of the two referenda was, the careful observers of the events understand that on the main conditions of the Gagauz leaders- the economic and financial situation of the region- will be taken more seriously in future by the Chisinau officials and donors.
- ▶ The Chisinau authorities should develop a communication strategy on the advantages of the European integration. Also, it is important to explain to the Gagauz people that the signing of the Association Agreement does not mean unification with Romania which is being speculated by the communist propaganda and which has determined the organization of the referendum on the special status of the autonomy.
- ▶ Another complex strategy that Chisinau should develop, adopt and implement is about settling the disputes between the local and central authorities. Inactiveness of the Chisinau politicians is one of the reasons for the happenings in UTA Gagauz-Yeri. We should not forget that the deputy Ivan Burgundji have announced back in summer of the last year about the fact that there had been collected 5000 signatures in favour of the independence referendum in case the problem of the special status of Gagauzia is not solved. The deadline for this referendum is December 2015.
- ▶ Chisinau should develop and implement ample programmes for learning the Romanian language in the autonomous region. Lack of knowledge of the official language of the Republic of Moldova as well as the continuous decrease in the number of the Russian language groups at the Chisinau universities, determines the massive migration of the Gagauz pupils to the higher education institutions from the Transnistrian region. Once they leave for study on the other side of the Nistru, it is difficult to imagine that the young Gagauz will be loyal to the Moldovan state and the European integration process.
- ▶ The European Commission should play an important role in the promotion of European ideas in Gagauzia. The Gagauz people are waiting for the five mln Euro promised in February 2013, by Dirk Schuebel, ex-head of the EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova. Also, in order to improve the image of the EU in UTA Gagauz-Yeri, a series of infrastructure projects could make it evident that their implementation was possible due to the European funds.

¹⁹ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=11188>