

# THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF GAGAUZIAN TURKS

## GAGAVUZ TÜRKLERİNİN SİYASİ VE EKONOMİK YAPISI

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### ABSTRACT

Most of the Gagauz population live in Bucak region in the South of Republic of Moldova. Gagauz people's language has the closest accent to Turkish language spoken in Turkey. The Gagauz gained their autonomy September 23 in 1993. Their population covers %4 of the total population of Moldova. Despite the fact that The Gagauz is a small society in the Balkans, Turkey attaches high importance to them. The connection between Gagauz people and Turkey reaches to the first years of Turkish Republic. Ataturk met the needs of The Gagauz and supported them in those years. In this study political statute, ethnic identity, economic situation and the geographical position of Gagauz people have been examined. The Gagauz that had not known well by Turks until the 1990s has been researched in details. Besides it has been mentioned that Gagauz people bridge The Republic of Moldova and Turkey both culturally and commercially as well as building amity between two nations.

**Keywords:** Turkey, The Republic of Moldova, Gagauz Autonomous Region

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### ÖZET

Gagavuz Türklerinin büyük çoğunluğu Moldova Cumhuriyeti'nin güneyinde Bucak bölgesinde yaşamaktadır. Gagavuzların konuştuğu dil Türkiye Türkçesine en yakın şivedir. 23 Aralık 1993 yılında özerkliğe kavuşmuştur. Moldova Cumhuriyeti Nüfusunun yüzde 4' ünü oluşturmaktadır. Balkanlarda küçük topluluk olsa da Türkiye için büyük önem arz etmektedir. Türkiye'nin Gagavuz Türkleri ile olan irtibatı Cumhuriyetin ilk yıllarına dayanmaktadır. Atatürk Gagavuz Türklerine gereken önem ve desteği sağlamıştır. Bu çalışmada Gagavuz Türklerinin yaşadığı coğrafya, etnik kimliği, ekonomisi ve politik statüsü incelenmiştir. 1990'lı yıllara kadar Türkiye toplumu tarafından pek fazla bilinmeyen Gagavuz Türkleri detaylı bir şekilde araştırılmıştır. Yine Gagavuzların Türkiye ile Moldova Cumhuriyeti arasında dostluk, kültürel ve ticari alanlarda bir köprü vazifesi üstlendiği konularına değinilmiştir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Türkiye, Moldova, Gagavuz Özerk Bölgesi

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova, declaring its independence on August 27, 1991, after the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics took its place in the World Map as an independent state. That new republic joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December, 1991. Turkey has been the first country who recognized the independence of the Republic of Moldova. The main reason for this act was many Gagauz Turks, who were considered as our compatriots, lived in the Southern and Southeastern part of the country since very early times.<sup>1</sup>(The newspaper of Anasözü, December 4, 2012) In the past 23 years, Moldova became a member of many international organizations. Moldova, as a member of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), has also entered into cooperation agreements in many areas with Turkey. The Gagauz Turks function as a bridge between Moldova and Turkey in all areas. Gagauzia, which is independent in internal affairs, but in external affairs acts together with Moldova, has a great importance for Turkey. Since they are speaking the same language, the Gagauzes, are one of the communities that are consanguineously close to Turks in the area. With the effect of globalization and the presence of our compatriots, who were not sufficiently recognized and known up until 1990s, has provided Gagauzia to establish economical, political and cultural closeness to and cooperation with Turkey.

After the Republic of Moldova attained independence, relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Gagauz Autonomous Region has started to gain momentum. Turkey provides all kinds of support in the areas of education, politics, economy and infrastructure. The then President Suleyman Demirel's visit in the first years of Moldova's autonomy and the agreements signed with the government clearly show the importance that Turkey gives to Gagauz region.

The policies of "perestroika"<sup>2</sup> and "glasnost"<sup>3</sup> that Mihail Gorbaçov put into during his presidency could not prevent the breakup of the USSR. (Ölmezoğulları 2012: 189,192) As a result, after the demise of the USSR, not only new independent states, but also new issues emerged. The Republic of Moldova was one of these independent countries that faces up problems. Moldova that hosts two different ethnicities succeeded to solve the Gagauz issue peacefully and diplomatically. However, the problem of Transnistria/Pridnestrovye<sup>4</sup> region where Russian ethnic groups live still continues.

## 2. THE GAGAUZ AUTONOMOUS REGION

It is estimated that about 250 thousand Gagauz Turks had lived throughout the old USSR lands. According to 2004 population census, most of them live (155.646 people) in the Bucak steppes in the

<sup>1</sup>(Newspaper anasozu December 4, 2012) It was compiled from the Newspaper Ana Sözü that the Gagauz Turks published.

<sup>2</sup>Perestroika (Перестройка): It means restructuring. It is the decisive changing process of social awareness that led to radical changes in life in the USSR in the mid-1980s committed to.

<sup>3</sup>Glasnost (Гласность): It means accessibility and transparency. It means accessibility to the activities of various government agencies and transparency of information about them and discussing them in a democratic society property

<sup>4</sup> It is the place where Russians live most. It is located on the edge of Dniester River on the east of Moldova

south of Moldova Republic.<sup>5</sup> This region is called "Gagauzia", "Gagauz Region" or "Gagauz Autonomous Region". Gagauz Turks live, apart from Moldova, in also Odessa<sup>6</sup>, Zaporajye and İzmail<sup>7</sup>, the cities of Ukraine (approximately 60 thousand). Gagauz inhabitants can also be seen in Kazakhstan, Krygyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kabartay-Balkar Autonomous Republic. Gagauz people live in Varna, a city of Bulgaria, in the towns of Kavarna, Duran Kulak, Balçık, in the villages of these towns and in Dobruca Region of Romania. It is also known that about 20 thousand Gagauz Turks live in Greece.<sup>8</sup>

The Gagauz constitute 4.5 percent of Moldova's population which is 3 million 600 thousand. The Moldova is a small country situated in south-eastern Europe with an area of about 33.843 square kilometers. Gagauzia lands constitute approximately 5.3 percent of Moldova territory. Moldova has also as a mixed ethnicity as the other republics separated from Soviet. While Moldavian (Moldovan's) constitute 69.5 per cent of the country, Ukrainians are 11.2 percent, the Russians are 9.4 percent and the share of Gagauzia is around 4 percent. The remaining 5.9 percent is other nations and ethnic groups (Bulgarians and citizens of the Central Asian Republics).

As a nation, "Gagauz", "Gagavuz" and "Gökoğuz" are common names, all refer to Gagauz Turks. The Gagauzes are orthodox Christian Turks. Although their names are Slavic, their surnames are Turkish. Their language, accent, customs and traditions are very similar to Anatolian Turkish culture.<sup>9</sup>

There are three provinces located in the border of Gagauzia Autonomous Region. These are: Comrat, Çadır-Lunga and Vulcanesti. 3 stars in the Gagauz flag represents these three provinces. The capital city is Comrat which is called head town by the Gagauz. According to official figures Gagauz population is 160 thousand. When Moldova's Gagauz living in different localities are included in the population, it exceeds 170 thousand.

In 1930, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gave great importance to the Gagauz Turks. Atatürk who provided contacts with them on several occasions sent books and different materials which were education needs of the Gagauz. Again, he was also in touch with Mikhail Cakir who was a scientist of Gagauz Turks in religion and history areas. Today, there is a large library and street in Comrat on behalf of Atatürk.

In order not to forget Gagauzian language, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk sent 80 primary school teachers through the agency of Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, who was the Turkish ambassador of Bucharest at the time. Nikolay Babaoğlu, who was the head of the Former Writers Union and the former deputy Minister of Education of Moldova, mentioned in his work "Anılarım" that he took Turkish lessons from Ali Kanterelli, one of these teachers, while in the second and third grades in 1937 (Babaoğlu 1995: 3,13).

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.statistica.md/public/files/Recensamint/Recensamintul\\_populatiei/vol\\_1/6\\_Nationalitati\\_de\\_baza\\_ro.xls](http://www.statistica.md/public/files/Recensamint/Recensamintul_populatiei/vol_1/6_Nationalitati_de_baza_ro.xls)(10.08.2014)

<sup>6</sup> Its name in Ottoman period was Odesa

<sup>7</sup> Its name in Ottoman period was İzmail

<sup>8</sup> [www.turkcebilgi.com](http://www.turkcebilgi.com) >Ansiklopedi (25.07.2014)

<sup>9</sup> [dunyaturkbirliigi.blogcu.com/gagavuz-turkleri/298580](http://dunyaturkbirliigi.blogcu.com/gagavuz-turkleri/298580) ( 01.08.2014)

The Gagauzes have been ruled over by the Ottomans, Russian Tsardom, Romania, Germany<sup>10</sup> and the Soviet Union in the history. In 1906, they founded a new state called "Comrat Republic", but kept their independence for only 15 days.<sup>11</sup>

The identity of Gagauz Autonomous Region that is in the status of an autonomous republic is summarized as in the chart below.

**Table 1. Identity of the Gagauz Autonomous Region**

Autonomous Region Title	Gagauz Autonomous Republic
Autonomy Declaration	December 23, 1994
Capital city	Comrat
Cities	Çadır Lunga, Vulkanеști
Population	Approximately 170 thousand (year 2012 data)
Ethnicity	Gagauz 83%, Bulgarians 5.1%, Moldovans 4.6%, Russians 3.7%, Ukrainians 3% and others 1%
Official Language	Gagauzian, Russian, Moldovian
The country dependent to	Moldovia
Government	Presidency and Unitary Parliamentary Republic
Residential Areas ( Villages )	29 villages
Area	1851 km <sup>2</sup>
Religion	Orthodox Christianity
Currency	Moldovian Lei, 1 USD dollar is about 15 Moldovian Lei.

### 3. POLITICAL STATUS

An entity called "Gagauz People" was founded in Comrat in 1987. This entity declared that Gagauz Region is an autonomous region on November 12, 1989. In August 1990, the Gagauz parliament declared "The Independent Gagauz Republic". However, independent Gagauz Republic was not recognized by the Republic of Moldova and the pressures began. There had been many problems on a small scale between 1990 and 1994. As a result of many experienced problems, the Republic of Moldova attempted to solve these problems by peaceful means. In the middle of 1994, Republic of Moldova decided to transfer all executive powers of the region called "Gagauzia" to the peoples of the Gagauz. On December 23, 1994, a special law on "Gagauz Autonomous Region", the region in the south of the country where Gagauzes are in majority, was accepted by the parliament of Moldovan Republic. According to this law, "The Gagauzia is a nation who live densely on the lands of Moldovan

<sup>10</sup>In the period of Second World War

<sup>11</sup><http://politikakademi.org/2013/05/unutulan-turkler-gagauzlar/> (13.08.2014).

Republic” and “They have got the primary legitimacy to establish an Autonomous Status for Gagauzia” (Law Number: 344 – XIII). According to this law, the Gagauzia attained an autonomous republic status which means they are free in their internal affairs but they will act together with Moldova in foreign affairs. This legislative right and power were given to Gagauzia on the condition that they will not act in the contrary to the Constitution of the Moldovan Republic. Gagauzia’s highest authority is the president and all government bodies and administrators are dependent on the president. The president is elected in every four years by referendum. The president of the Gagauzia is also the member of Moldovan Government. The president has the authority of accepting or rejecting bills. Gagavuz assembly is called “Halk Topluşu” which is composed of 35 congressmen. Congressmen are elected by the public with general elections. It is obligatory to elect at least one congressman in each settlement. Ministers and department heads of Gagauzia are also the members of relevant ministries of Moldovan Republic. The right of immunity is granted to the congressmen of the Gagauzia Halk Topluşu within the borders of autonomous region (Güneykaya 2012: 36-37).

According to the status given to Gagauz administration, Halk Topluşu has the legislative authority of making laws in the areas such as culture, art, science, education, settling, municipal services, health, sport, finance and economy.

A decree determining the borders of Gagauz Autonomous Region was accepted on March 5, 1995 and was held a referendum on. In this decree, today’s Gagauz area borders and settlements are defined. According to this, on Gagauz land, there are 3 cities 29 villages and 32 settlements all of which covers an area of 1851 square kilometres (Iusumbelim 2008: 1,2, Velev 2007: 138).

Turkey’s policies and aids towards Gagauzes date back to the first days when Moldova Republic gained its independence. Being one of the first countries who recognized Moldova’s independence, Turkey started diplomatic relations with Moldova at once. Turkey opened a consulate in Kishinev and diplomatically displayed that it is interested in financial, educational and diplomatic issues of the Gagauzia. In education-wise Turkey was especially interested in giving the opportunity to Turkish students to study at Comrat State University. On June 3, 1994, Süleyman Demirel, the term President of Turkey, visited Gagauz Autonomous Region. Süleyman Demirel and Mircea Snegur<sup>12</sup>, the term president of Moldovan Republic, signed an agreement of friendship and cooperation between the two countries. The 13th clause of this Agreement says: : “Both parties consider that current ethnical, cultural and language relationships between Gagauz and Turkish publics and their mutual efforts will contribute to the Gagauzian identity with the belief that this situation will cause a new bilateral cooperation and Gagauzia will form a bridge that strengthens the friendship between Turkey and Moldova.”<sup>13</sup> It is seen that the issues between Moldova and Gagauzia are solved peacefully and

<sup>12</sup>After independence, the first President of the Republic of Moldova

<sup>13</sup>[http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR\\_KARARLAR/kanunbmmc079/kanunbmmc079/kanunbmmc07904145.pdf](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanunbmmc079/kanunbmmc079/kanunbmmc07904145.pdf) (13.08.2014).

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diplomatically which paved the way for the law on "Gagauz Autonomous Region" to be accepted by the Moldovan Parliament on December 23, 1994.

Turkey's policies related to the Gagauzes are mainly based on supporting the Gagauzes to develop in every sector, helping them to keep their national identity and sharing Turkey's governmental experiences with them.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. ITS ECONOMY

The economy of Gagauz Autonomous Region is mostly based on agriculture and stockbreeding. Gagauzia's industry and tourism sectors are undeveloped and there are scarcely any companies being active in these sectors. Viticulture is the main driving force of the agriculture-based economy of Gagauzia. Therefore, vinification and vinification technology are highly developed. That is the reason why Gagauzian people render most of their revenue from vinification. Gagauzia also grows some other agricultural products such as walnuts, sunflowers, tobacco plants, soybeans, cereals, oleiferous plants, sweetcorns and fruits. (Güneykaya 2012: 38-39)

Some of the industrial facilities operating in the Gagauz Autonomous Region are eight big wine distilleries, three flour mills, one tobacco fermentation factory, three milk factories, three feed factories, one rug weaving factory, some fruit juice factories and seven clothes factories and many small-sized enterprises (Güneykaya 2012: 39).

The Gagauz use Moldovan lei (ML) as currency. Banking services are also developed. There is a Gagauz bank for Gagauz people. Other branches of the banks in Moldova also provide services.

Efforts of transition to a free market economy continue in Gagauzian Autonomous Region. Especially, state-owned factories remaining in the USSR and the privatization of land reforms are carried out. Industry and businesses are re-configured in accordance with European Union norms. There are increases in infrastructure investments of private sector.

The number of large and small businesses in Gagauzia is increasing every day. Some business organisations left from the Soviet times have been privatised. Due to the lack of systemised irrigation system, the farmers are not able to yield the amount of crop they expect.

Shuttle trade between Gagauz Region and Turkey is very widespread as visitors carrying goods worth less than 2000 USA dollars can enter Moldova without paying any customs fee.

There is a free industry zone in Vulkaneshti<sup>15</sup> in Gagauz Autonomous Region. This free zone is in the intersection of three countries (Moldova-Ukraine-Romania). The free zone is also close to the Danube river which makes the region to benefit the advantage of marine transportation.

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<sup>14</sup><http://orsam.org.tr/yazigoster.aspx?ID=4054> (05.08.2014)

<sup>15</sup>It is said colloquially as Vulcănești.

The total export of Gagauzian Autonomous Region by years is shown in Moldovan lei on the table below.

**Table 2. Gagauz Autonomous Republic, total export**

Years	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Export (million lei)	590.6	995.7	830.9	699.8	849.4	816.4	1005.8

Resource: İspolkom 01.01.2011 statistical data

In 2011, 64 of 230 Turkish firms in Moldovan Republic were operating in Gagauz Region. The advantages provided by the Moldovan Republic and Gagauzia because of their beneficial relations with the EU and CIS markets are attractive for Turkish investors. In Gagauz Autonomous Region, according to 2011 ORSAM data, there are 129 foreign-capital companies.<sup>10</sup> (Anasözü 2012, No:12)

#### **4.1. Economic Problems in the Gagauz Autonomous Region**

The biggest problems of Gagauz are respectively irrigation, transportation and unemployment. These problems leave the region economy passive. In fact, the government of the Republic of Moldova is supposed to solve these problems. The reason for the failure to resolve this problem is the fact that the Gagauz Region is autonomous. The irrigation problem affects the agricultural efficiency, the transportation problem affects the social structure. In case summer is dry and irrigation system lacks, there is a decline in yields of agricultural products. Yield reduction leads to more expensive foodstuffs. Unemployment triggers external migration. Today, many Gagauz people must go abroad, especially Turkey, the Russian Federation and other European countries, in order to work. This has negative consequences on families and new generations that will grow.

#### **4.2. Interzonal Economic Development Status in the Republic of Moldova**

According to the 1<sup>st</sup> article in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, the Gagauz Autonomous Region belongs to Gagauzia and it is a local autonomous entity connected to Moldova. According to this constitution, the Gagauz Autonomous Region also has very significant powers in economy and tax collection. In short, the economic independence of the region, and tax collection authority is guaranteed by the constitution.

<sup>10</sup>The Newspaper Ana Sözü (Anasözü 2012, No:12)

**Table 3. Economy Data According to the Development of the Republic of Moldova and Regional Developments in 2007<sup>11</sup>**

Regional Range %	Industrial Production	Harvest of agricultural products	The main capital investment	Construction Sector	Freight Transportation	Passenger Transport	Retail sales	Paid services
Chisinau (the capital)	53,1	0,5	56,6	62,0	58,9	58,2	56,9	61,2
Northern Region	24,9	37,6	15,8	12,1	11,9	22,1	20,2	16,2
The Central Zone	15,7	18,8	16,8	15,7	25,1	12,4	13,8	12,9
Southern Region	3,5	32,0	8,9	8,7	3,4	6,4	6,2	6,7
Gagauz Autonomous Region	2,8	11,1	1,8	1,4	0,8	0,8	2,9	3,0
Pridnestrovy <sup>12</sup>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Republic of Moldova (the total amount)	19568	434828	12763,2	7106,2	4916,5	103,06	16891,8	9313,8

Source: Prohnițchi V, Oprunenco A. ș.a., Republica Moldova 2007: Raport de Stare a Țării (6.1. Resursele naturale ale țării, autor Sochircă V.), Centrul Analitic Independent „Expert Grup”, Bons Offices, Chișinău, 2008

In general, it is seen that the Gagauz Autonomous Region has a significant share in the national economy of the Republic of Moldova in comparison with developments in other four regions. Gagauz Region has a high potential of the industry and agriculture sector compared with smaller regions and towns. Until 2005 the Gagauz region took the first place in all regions of Moldova. It was ensued that it is only 3 times underdeveloped according to the city of Belts and 12 times underdeveloped according to the city of Chisinau.

There was a decline in the industrial sector in the Gagauz Autonomous Republic in 2006-2007. This shows the weakness of its economy. This region is vulnerable to all kinds of economic and non-economic shocks. Climatic factors (especially drought) and trade barriers have given much harm to the economy.

Gagauz region's weak economy is due to two main factors as follows:

- It is due to the fact that goods-producers and importers are not in a position to establish long-term contracts with abroad.

<sup>11</sup>It shows the companies employing more than 20 in the table.

<sup>12</sup> It has been left blank because Pridnestrovy region is troubled and it is impossible to reach correct data.



- The facts that there is just the existence of the state in services sector in general, commercial services are limited, share of public services in the service sector in total sales is as high as 45%.

Although fruit (watermelon, melon, etc.) grown in warm climates can be grown in Gagauz Autonomous Region, it realizes 1.5-2.5% vegetable production and 4-5% of fruit production rate of the country-wide. Products harvested from agricultural land can not be fully processed due to the lack of necessary technology. Therefore, the harvested products are exported as untreated seeds.

The region's economic difficulties are due to insufficient investments in the manufacturing sector. Very few investments have been made to the Gagauz Region in 2003-2007 compared with other regions. Only in the Gagauz region in the years 2005-2007, the amount of investments to the main capital has decreased. It is at risk of losing the production branches in which it is superior to other regions.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, some ethnical problems emerged in most countries who gained their independence. Some of these problems caused wars such as those appeared in Nagorno-Karabagh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea and lastly in Ukraine. Among all these problems the only one diplomatically and peacefully solved is the Gagauz issue. Gagauz issue can be a sample case for solving other similar problems.

Although 24 years passed after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkey have not been able to show interest in our compatriots and brothers at a satisfactory level. The biggest indicator of this uninterest is the lack of economic, cultural, etc. facilities built by Turkey in the region. To open a university in the Balkans, especially in the Gagauz Autonomous Region would be a correct step to be taken by Turkey, for example.

The Gagauz Turks whom Atatürk cared in 1937, can take on a role of being a bridge of economy, culture and friendship between Turkey and countries such as Moldova, Ukraine and Romania.

As citizenship and passport are given to the Gagauz citizens in Bulgaria and Romania unconditionally without issuing any difficulty, Turkey can also grant citizenship to Gagauzes who have been residing in Turkey for a certain period of time (3 or 5 years).

As the last word, few but honorable people like Gagauz Turks need and have the rights of saving their identity and self-respect. If we overlook the assimilation of small Turkic populations, unfortunately we cannot lead to a large and powerful Turkish world.

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