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# The Gagaouzes

## Description

***Before 1989 and the emergence of a Gagauz secessionist movement on the territory of the Moldovan SSR, even the most knowledgeable of the internal political structure of the USSR had probably never heard of the Gagauz people (or Gagauz, as it is sometimes spelled), since they never had their territorial structure within the Union.***

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This article aims to shed light on these little-known European people, whose role in the history and current economic dynamics of the continent is undoubtedly negligible, but who is worthy of interest, if only as a model of political wisdom: they are the only people in Eastern Europe who have voluntarily renounced the independence they had self-proclaimed a few years earlier.



## The Gagaouze genesis

The Gagauz were identified in Varna, Bulgaria, for the first time in history in the 13th century. They are believed to be descendants of one of the Oghuz<sup>[1]</sup> peoples who crossed the steppes of the northern Caspian and the Black Sea during the Middle Ages before entering the Balkans, the Oghouzes, or the Coumans<sup>[2]</sup>. However, others have seen them as descendants of Turkish-speaking Anatolian peoples; indeed, it seems inevitable that Seljuk Turks came to settle in the region<sup>[3]</sup>, but they probably blended into a pre-established community.

In any case, a wolf's presence on their emblem proves that the Gagauz identify with the Turkish group (without feeling close to other Turkish speakers). These Oghuz invaders were settled in what is now Dobrudja<sup>[4]</sup> by the restorer of the Byzantine Empire, Michael VIII Palaeologus, who gave one of their chiefs this region as a fiefdom to control them better. This man, called Kay-Ka'us, gave his name to his state, founded in 1296<sup>[5]</sup>. After his death, the state of the Kay-Ka'us (those of the Kay-Ka'us tribe) was called the State of the Kay-Ka'us, and later, by semantic shift, the State of the Gagauz<sup>[6]</sup>. They converted to the Greek Orthodox religion. Most of them remained faithful to the Patriarch of Constantinople after the Ottoman invasion led by Bayasid I in 1398, which ended the only lasting political entity they knew in their history. Their descendants decided to emigrate to the North in the second half of the 18th century, fleeing the Russian-Turkish wars and preferring to approach the assertive Orthodox Russia, which became the protector of all Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire in 1774. Most settled in the regions of Izmaïl and Bender<sup>[7]</sup> and then populated in successive waves most of the plain of Boudjak during the first half of the 19th century<sup>[8]</sup>.

Between 1856 and 1878, the attachment of southern Bessarabia to the principality of Moldavia (which became Romania in 1859 through its union with Wallachia) and the settlement of Ukrainians on the Bessarabian coast until 1917 led the Gagauz to concentrate in the center of Boudjak<sup>[9]</sup>. Most of them who live in Moldova today (a population of 154,000) are spread out in about 30 villages in the districts of Komrat, Tchadir-Lunga, Kangaz, Taraklia, and Vulkanechti. Nevertheless, about 45,000 Gagauz live outside Moldova. Beyond the Dniester, they are found in the districts of Odessa, Zaporodje, and Rostov-on-Don<sup>[10]</sup>. South of the Danube, the descendants of those who refused to go into exile live mainly in the regions of Varna and Baltchik. The twists and turns of history have thus made the Gagauz language, which is impregnated with Russian and Ukrainian<sup>[11]</sup>, the most western of the Turkic languages<sup>[12]</sup>.

## The Gagauz minority in contemporary turmoil

However, the integration of the Gagauz into the Russian world – in the broadest sense – is not limited to linguistic or religious aspects; it seems to be more deeply rooted in history. One might wonder whether the Gagauz are not more interested in belonging to the Russian world than in being truly independent. During the Russian revolution of 1917,

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although they did not oppose the autonomist tendencies of Bessarabia, which was essentially Romanian-speaking, they were more tempted by an attachment to Ukraine or, failing that, by the creation of a political entity distinct from that of the Romanian-speaking population, either Gagauz or Bulgaro-Gagauz[13]. When the Moldavian soldiers' soviet voted for autonomy on 2 November 1917, and when a Bessarabia Country Council was formed a few days later, only the Ukrainians of Cetatea Alba county[14] and the Bulgarian-Gagauz Committee of Tighina publicly deplored the creation of a single autonomous Bessarabia stretching from Bukovina to the Black Sea. As a result of the ratification by the Romanian Parliament on 11 March 1924 of the Treaty of Paris (28 October 1920) accepting the attachment of Bessarabia to Romania, the Gagauz of Buzhak, led by a certain Bunar, rose in the summer of 1924, arguing that the successor state of the Russian Empire – in this case, the USSR – had not recognized this attachment. – From the 1930s onwards, the Romanian administration tried to impose the adoption of the Latin alphabet on the Gagauz, replacing the Greek alphabet they had been using until then, without much success. It is symptomatic that the Russian Cyrillic alphabet introduced during the Soviet era was very quickly adopted in 1957.

– With the proclamation of the Moldovan parliament concerning the use of Romanian as the only official language of the SSR (1989), the Gagauz expressed their discontent. It must be said that they told themselves in Russian (75% of them spoke it fluently) or in their language, but certainly not in Moldovan[16]. Following the publication of the declaration of sovereignty by the Moldovan SSR parliament (23 June 1990), the Gagauz declared their own SSR on 19 August. In the referendum on the Union of 17 March 1991, they voted massively in favor of remaining within the USSR (98.9% in turn with an exceptional turnout of 98%), proving that the foundation of their republic was more an expression of the desire to remain in the Russian world than of national emancipation. The support of their president, Stepan Topal, for the Moscow putsch of 18 August shows that the Gagauz feared that Gorbachev's policy would lead the Moldovan SSR to proclaim its independence unilaterally.

Indeed, an attachment of the former Moldovan SSR to Romania was becoming very likely; as the Gagauzia SSR had no international legal existence, the Gagauz were in danger of being returned to the Romanian fold. Even if the Moldovan SSR became and remained a separate state from Romania (which it did), there was no doubt that Romania would use its legitimate power to defend its territorial integrity and recover the Gagauz territories. The putsch's failure only precipitated the break-up of the USSR and led Moldova to declare independence on 27 August 1991. As a result, Gagauzia became independent on 21 December 1991. Excluded from the CIS, since neither Moldova nor their internationally ignored republic was part of it, the Gagauz found themselves cut off from the Russian world.

### **Gagaouze-like wisdom**

The collapse of the Moldovan army in Transdnistria indirectly prevented a bloody repression in Gagauzia. Faced with the thorny problem posed to the Moldovan authorities by the Russian secession, the importance of the Gagauz secession was minimized, and its resolution should have been considered a priority. It must be said that the territories (1800 km<sup>2</sup> in Gagauzia versus 5000 km<sup>2</sup> in Transdnistria) and the populations at stake (150,000 Gagauzes versus 760,000 Russian speakers, representing respectively 3.5% versus 25% of Moldova's population) were not comparable; moreover, the economic consequences of the Russian secession were much more severe: loss of Moldova's most industrialized region, cutting off of the gas pipeline, and loss of the leading maritime outlets (Odesa and central Ukraine). Moreover, the Gagauz were careful to avoid the situation from getting out of hand[17] and kept it private. However, they still had to decline the hollow proposal of Moldovan President Mircea Snegur to create a Gagauz national department within Moldova.

Nevertheless, common ground was eventually found with the Moldovan authorities. The economic crisis in their small state, deprived of access to the sea and wholly landlocked and ignored by the international community (especially the former Russian protector), finally convinced the Gagauz authorities to agree with Moldova to normalize the situation. It is precisely on this point that the Gagauz attitude was marked by great wisdom, as this normalization was achieved at the price of renouncing their independence. The change in the regional context indeed favored this renunciation since, during the legislative elections of 27 February 1994 – the first free elections in Moldova – the supporters of a policy of neutrality came to power, which removed the prospect of an attachment to Romania; in addition to objectivity, they also

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proposed a cautious economic transition based on agricultural cooperatives (which was necessary for the Gagauz, who were mainly peasants and had suffered exceptionally from the brutal changes in the economy). Still, above all, they spoke of negotiating with the minorities.

This negotiation, supported by the CSCE, resulted on 28 August in the drafting a constitution giving the Gagauz language the status of an official language, in the same way as Romanian and Russian. Furthermore, a significant degree of autonomy was granted to the territorial formation of Gagauz Eri, giving it the right to external self-determination in the event of Moldova's attachment to Romania<sup>[18]</sup>. Independent Gagauzia thus dissolved itself following the adoption of the constitution. Since then, the situation of the Gagauzies has not improved significantly; they are still suffering from the severe economic crisis, and it is not the Moldovans, who are also in great difficulty, who can help them at the moment. Turkey had promised help, but it needs to be visible. However, the Gagauz did not lose everything: they could avoid a bloodbath, which would only have exacerbated the difficulties and generated chaos.

In the absence of war, they have been able to make their voices heard. Their institutions function well and are supported by the Moldovans. On 28 May 1995, they elected 35 members of their khalk toplouch, the parliament, which has been working regularly since then, although its prerogatives are limited. The current president, Petru Lucinschi (elected in November 1996), a Russophile and supporter of rapprochement with the Dniester Republic, is keen to respect Gagauz autonomy: the Gagauz have thus acquired respectability that can only be useful to them in the future.

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[1] Turks migrated from the supposed cradle of the Turkic peoples in the Altai to the West.

[2] it's also Polovotses/viets.

[3] The founder of the Gagauz state was precisely a Seljuk.

[4] Divided in 1945 between Romania and Bulgaria.

[5] The capital was Karvuna (now Kavarna).

[6] Another of their rulers, in the second half of the 14th century, left enough of a mark on the region's history for his name to be remembered: Dobrotitch (the name Dobrudja being derived from his name).

[7] Name given by the Turks to the town of Tighina, which became Bendery during the Soviet period.

[8] The movement intensified from 1812 onwards, following Russia's definitive annexation of Bessarabia and the exodus of the Tartars from Boudjak to the south.

[9] In the three counties of southern Bessarabia (Kahul, Bolgrad, and Izmaïl), there was a significant Gagauz minority in 1856 (nearly 30% of the population), whereas in 1878 most of them had left the area.

[10] For the sake of completeness, we can even specify that several hundred Gagauz families were led, during the Soviet period, to settle in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (near Tashkent).

[11] Muffling of some consonants, the appearance of Slavic suffixes such as -ka or -yka, and lexical borrowings.

[12] Although Bulgarian, Greek, and Romanian also influenced the vocabulary, albeit to a lesser extent.

[13] Bulgarian peasants came to settle in the regions of Izmaïl and Bolgrad, attracted by the tax exemption decreed by the Russian authorities in Bessarabia due to the annexation of this region in 1812. In 1917, they represented (and still represent) the most significant minority after the Gagauz in Boudjak. Culturally, the Gagauz felt closer to the Bulgarians than to the Romanians.

[14] Akkerman, from its Turkish name, and later Bielgorod Dniestrovskii.

[15] Judging that the Soviet government did not represent a legitimate Russian government, Romania did not consider the Gagauz opinion, and the revolt was crushed in blood.

[16] The Moldavian language is more a dialect of Romanian than a language in its own right.

[17] The Gagauz secession did result in some casualties, notably at the end of September 1991, following sporadic clashes between police and nationalists, but this is nothing compared to the 700 victims of the war in Transnistria between 1991 and 1992.

[18] Although the text indicates that the land, subsoil, water, fauna, and flora of Gagauzia are the property of the people of Moldova, this implies that, in case of attachment to Romania, only Gagauz individuals will be able to remain outside Romania (i.e., leave the territory!).

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[Back to the top of the page](#)

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