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The Gagauz Republic: An Autonomism-Driven De Facto State

Abstract

The post-Soviet area is a home for a several de facto states, which are entities that resemble "normal" states but lack international recognition. This paper examines a historical case study of the Gagauz Republic (Gagauzia), a de facto state that existed on the territory of Soviet and then independent Moldova between 1990 and 1995. Whilst the prevailing view in the literature on de facto states is that these entities strive for internationally recognised independence, this study draws on a new suite of sources (including interviews, memoirs and journalism) to argue that the Gagauz Republic's leaders did not pursue the goal of independence. Instead, they sought autonomism, pursuing a measure of self-governance within Gagauzia's two subsequent parent states, namely the Soviet Union and then independent Moldova.

Keywords

Gagauz Republic, Gagauzia, de facto state, autonomism, independence

Introduction

According to a recent study by Adrian Florea, the post-Soviet area is a home for seven de facto states: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, as well as, in a historical perspective, Ajaria, Chechnya, and the Gagauz Republic (Gagauzia).[1] Except for the

* The author would like to thank all persons interviewed during field research conducted in Moldova and Ukraine. Many of interviews were facilitated by Elena Cuijuclu from the Comrat State University, for which she deserves sincere thanks. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

[1] Adrian Florea, "De Facto States in International Politics (1945–2011): A New Data Set," *International Interactions* 40, no. 5 (2014): 793, doi:10.1080/03050629.2014.915543.

Ajarian case, this coincides with findings in earlier work by Nina Caspersen.[2] In short, de facto states resemble "normal" states except for one difference: they lack international recognition or enjoy it only at a minimal level. This means that their territories formally belong to universally recognised states – in the abovementioned cases, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Russia – although in reality the authorities of these parent states have no or limited control over their breakaway regions.

This article focuses on the Gagauz Republic, a de facto state existing on the territory of Soviet and then independent Moldova, established by the Gagauz – Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians. The republic was proclaimed on August 19, 1990 to be a separate entity from Soviet Moldova but still remain a part of the Soviet Union. Soon, having endured an attempt by the leadership of Soviet Moldova to crush it by force at the end of October 1990, the Gagauz entity achieved de facto independence from Moldova. In fact, the Gagauz Republic was de facto independent from the Soviet Union as well.[3] Gagauzia existed as a de facto state until June 1995 when it was voluntarily and ultimately reintegrated as an autonomous region by already independent Moldova. At that time, the newly elected authorities of the Gagauz autonomy inaugurated their work, officially taking over power from the Gagauz Republic's leadership.

While Raul Toomla rightly notes that no coherent theory on de facto states exists and that there is a multiplicity of terms and concepts,[4] the majority of researchers clearly state (or at least imply) that de facto states strive for internationally recognised independence. This is the case with Caspersen, whose unrecognised state "has declared formal independence or demonstrated clear aspirations for independence, for example through an independence referendum, adoption of a separate currency or similar act that clearly signals separate statehood."[5] Florea claims that a de facto state "seeks some degree of separation" from a parent state but simultaneously refers to Caspersen's independence criterion and Bridget

[2] Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 12.

[3] At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Moscow's control over its territory was waning, while the level of power and independence of Soviet republics, including those that were self-proclaimed, gradually increased. Accordingly, Kafuman points out that by the summer of 1990 "Moscow was reduced more and more to the role of an outside intervener rather than a sovereign authority" in a conflict between Moldova and Gagauzia (and Transnistria). Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 154.

[4] Raul Toomla, *De facto states in the international system: Conditions for (in-)formal engagement* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 59.

[5] Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, 11.

Coggins's definition of a secessionist movement that strives for a newly independent state.[6] Apparently, it was Scott Pegg who set the tone for this research, as he developed the first concept of the de facto state. His entity "seeks full constitutional independence and widespread international recognition as a sovereign state."[7]

In this study it is argued that the Gagauz Republic's authorities did not seek internationally recognised independence. Instead, the Gagauz leadership sought autonomism understood as a desire to achieve a measure of self-governance without seceding from a parent state.[8] For the purpose of this study, autonomism includes not only autonomy and federal arrangements but also confederal arrangements. Given that the Gagauz Republic was proclaimed when Moldova was a part of the Soviet Union, it was the latter that initially was the parent state of the Gagauz de facto state. While Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union on August 27, 1991, in this paper, Moldova is designated as a parent state of Gagauzia from December 25, 1991 onwards, i.e. since the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a state.

Given that the Gagauz case is largely overlooked in the scholarship on de facto states, this study is based on the literature studies on Gagauzia and three new kinds of sources. First, there are thirty-five semi-structured interviews, mainly conducted with the leadership of the Gagauz Republic and activists of the Gagauz national movement. Secondly, the paper employs memoirs written by Mikhail Kendigelian, a chairman of the Gagauz Republic's parliament, and by Stepan Topal, the republic's president.[9] Thirdly, the study draws on newspapers published at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s in the Gagauz region: *Leninskoe slovo / Komratskie vesti* (Comrat), *Znamia* (Ceadîr-Lunga) and *Panorama* (Vulcănești).

This article starts by presenting the origins of the Gagauz Republic. Next, it provides arguments that the Gagauz authorities did not seek secession from the Soviet Union and then independent Moldova, meaning they did not desire internationally recognised independence. It then discusses the Gagauz leadership's rationale for not pursuing the goal of independence.

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[6] Florea, "De Facto States," 791. See also Bridget Coggins, "Friends in High Places: International Politics and the Emergence of States from Secessionism," *International Organization* 65, no. 3 (2011): 454, doi: 10.1017/S0020818311000105.

[7] Scott Pegg, *International Society and the De Facto State* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 26.

[8] Stefan Wolff, "Beyond Ethnic Politics in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, no. 4 (2002): 6, http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2002/nr4/Focus4-2002_Wolff_Kymlicka.pdf.

[9] Mikhail Kendigelian, *Gagauzskaia Respublika: Bor'ba gagauzov za natsional'noe samoopredelenie. 1989–1995. Vospominaniia. Dokumenty* (Komrat, 2009); Stepan Topal, *Po zovu predkov* (Komrat, 2013). Only the most important offices held by interviewees during the existence of the Gagauz Republic are mentioned in the paper. Proper names are provided in the text in their Russian, transliterated versions due to linguistic Russification of the Gagauz.

After that, drawing on a critical assessment of the literature studies on Gagauzia, it argues that the Gagauz Republic's authorities strived for autonomism within the Soviet Union and then independent Moldova. Finally, in a concluding section, it argues that as an entity pursuing the goal of autonomism instead of independence, the Gagauz Republic can still be classified as a de facto state. In addition, it focuses on further developments, discussing the independence aspirations of the Gagauz autonomy elites which they allegedly pursued in the 2010s.

The paper also provides some comparisons with Transnistria – another breakaway region of Moldova – regarding a period of the Gagauz de facto state's existence from 1990 to 1995. Transnistria can be considered to be Gagauzia's peer – on September 2, 1990 it was proclaimed a separate republic from Soviet Moldova but still a part of the Soviet Union. What is important is that Transnistria not only functioned as a de facto state during the first years of independent Moldova but, unlike Gagauzia, it has continued as such to the present day. Yet, it does not automatically mean that the Transnistrian leadership strove for internationally recognised independence. Pål Kolstø et al. noted in April 1993 that Transnistria's authorities sought to establish a confederation with Moldova (and Gagauzia). They mentioned establishment of an independent state as just one of the alternatives along with other possibilities, albeit less realistic, i.e. annexation to either Russia or Ukraine or inclusion in a united eastern Slav state.[10] What is certain is that Transnistria's elites strongly desired to separate from Moldova (while the Gagauz leadership did not have such an intention at all).

Origins of the Gagauz Republic[11]

The Gagauz resettled from Dobrudja (now in Bulgaria and Romania) to southern Bessarabia, known also as Budjak (now in Moldova and Ukraine) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This region was a part of the Russian Empire, then Romania and finally the Soviet Union. It was the Soviet republic of Moldova that became a home for the majority of the Gagauz people worldwide (according to the 1989 Soviet census, there were 153.5

[10] Pål Kolstø, Andrei Edemsky, and Natalya Kalashnikova, "The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 6 (1993): 996–97, doi:10.1080/09668139308412137.

[11] This section is based on the following works: John A. Webster, "Parliamentary Majorities and National Minorities: Moldova's Accommodation of the Gagauz" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 2007); Petr Shornikov, "Dvizhenie gagauzskogo naroda za avtonomiiu v period krizisa SSSR," in *Istoriia i kul'tura gagauzov: Ocherki*, ed. Stepan Bulgar (Komrat, Kishineu: Pontos, 2006); Dareg A. Zabarah, "Opportunity Structures and Group Building Processes: An Institutional Analysis of the Secession Processes in Pridnestrovie and Gagauzia between 1989 and 1991," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45, nos. 1–2 (2012), doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.03.007.

thousand of the Gagauz in this republic who constituted 3.5% of its population). Despite the fact that under the rule of the Soviet Union the Gagauz advanced socially and economically, they were one of the most disadvantaged ethnic groups in Soviet Moldova. What enabled their national rebirth – led by the Gagauz Halky (Gagauz People) movement – was perestroika, a programme of restructuring the Soviet Union launched in 1986 by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The point was to preserve and foster their culture and boost economic development of their backward region. The Gagauz believed that their problems would be resolved if they were granted territorial autonomy within the Soviet republic of Moldova.

However, to the disadvantage of the Gagauz, the Moldovan national movement – led by the Popular Front of Moldova – grew more powerful and radical. It led to the adoption of language laws in autumn 1989 that granted official language status to Moldovan written in Latin script (which was, in fact, identical to Romanian), barely spoken by the dominantly Russian- or Gagauz-speaking Gagauz population. Further, the Popular Front took power in Moldova in the aftermath of the 1990 parliamentary elections, while its radical wing was openly in favour of full reunion with Romania. The issue for the Gagauz was that the period when Moldova (Bessarabia) was a part of Romania was remembered in their collective memory as time of occupation and national oppression. The Popular Front also radicalised its position towards national minorities. These moves unsettled the Gagauz population and challenged the vested interests of local elites, consolidating the Gagauz national movement and strengthening the need for territorial autonomy (additionally guaranteeing internationalism and the official status not only for Gagauz, but also for the Russian language). A similar situation unfolded in heavily Sovietized and Russified Transnistria, populated by Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians.

Despite growing tensions between Moldovans and the Gagauz, and due to the efforts of the Gagauz at all-union level, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet set up a commission with representatives of the Gagauz Halky in August 1989 explicitly to study the question of Gagauz autonomy within Soviet Moldova. In order to press the Moldovans and push the autonomy issue forward, the Gagauz proclaimed the Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on November 12, 1989. Although they then sought formal recognition from the Moldovan Supreme Soviet, their declaration was swiftly overturned and ruled illegal. Nevertheless, the autonomy commission still continued to function, though ultimately its work ended without consensus.

A new commission was set up after the 1990 Moldovan elections, but this time just with a single Gagauz MP. Based on its conclusions, on July 27, 1990, the Moldovan Supreme

Soviet, controlled by the Popular Front of Moldova, ultimately refused to grant territorial autonomy to the Gagauz as a non-indigenous ethnic group and ruled that they had no rights to Moldova's land. The Gagauz, represented by people's deputies at all-levels from the Gagauz area (from villages to the Soviet Union's Supreme Soviet), responded on August 19, 1990, with the establishment of the Gagauz Republic, an entity remaining a part of the Soviet Union but independent from Soviet Moldova. Given that political separation from Moldova had not previously been considered by the Gagauz, this was a wholly unexpected move and meant that the declaration of independence had had to be drafted at the last moment.

No Desire to Secede from the Soviet Union

Some scholars may maintain that the Gagauz Republic declared its full independence on August 19, 1990. However, as previously noted, the reality is that the Gagauz announced independence just from the Soviet republic of Moldova and declared creation of their entity within the federal Soviet Union, expressing their will to sign a new union treaty under discussion at that time.[12] An alternative argument, made by Dareg A. Zabarah, is that the Gagauz Republic declared its final independence (including from the Soviet Union) exactly a year later, on August 19, 1991, coinciding with the beginning of the Moscow Putsch against Gorbachev. Zabarah suggests that the previous approach, to remain a part of the Soviet Union, was a strategic decision designed to help keep Gagauzia afloat.[13] But the Gagauz leaders interviewed as part of this study deny that such a declaration was ever made.[14] Moreover, the Gagauz Republic's leadership welcomed the putsch, hoping that it would help save the Soviet Union, an entity regarded by the Gagauz as their homeland.[15] Little wonder that almost all the population of the Gagauz area voted in the March 1991 referendum (boycotted by Moldova) in favour of keeping the Soviet Union.

Stepan Bulgar writes that the Gagauzans declared independence when the Moscow coup failed in August of 1991.[16] However, given that interviewed representatives of the Gagauz Republic's leadership deny a declaration of full independence was ever made, any

[12] Deklaratsiia o svobode i nezavisimosti gagauzskogo naroda ot respubliki Moldova, 19 avgusta 1990, Komrat, in Nikolai Dimitroglo, *S"ezdy gagauzskogo naroda: Deputaty vsekh urovnei, deputaty vsekh sozyvov narodnogo sobraniia Gagauzii* (Komrat, 2014), 68–71.
[13] Zabarah, "Opportunity Structures," 187.
[14] For example, Mikhail Kendigelian, interview by author, October 15, 2015, Comrat; Stepan Topal, interview by author, July 9, 2015, Comrat; Konstantin Taushanzhi, interview by author, October 14, 2015, Comrat.
[15] Topal, *Po zovu predkov*, 116.
[16] Stepan Bulgar, "Narodnoe dvizhenie «Gagauz khalky» (1989–1994 gg.)," *Rusin*, no. 4 (2006): 171.

statement or appeal made in the late summer of 1991 should be seen simply as reinforcing the August 1990 declaration in the face of Moldova announcing its own (post-putsch) independence on August 27, 1991. The Soviet Union was still recognised by the Gagauz as their homeland.[17] Unlike the Gagauz, Transnistrian authorities did issue a declaration of Transnistria's independence when the Moscow coup failed on August 25, 1991. However, this was rather a tactical ploy to escape the control of Moldova that was expected to proclaim its final independence from the Soviet Union. While giving an address at the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the declaration of independence, Transnistrian President Igor Smirnov emphasized that Transnistria had never seceded from the Soviet Union.[18]

Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper argue that Topal, who won the non-alternative Gagauz presidential elections on December 1, 1991, initially wanted outright independence for his republic.[19] But his electoral programme assumed establishment of a federation or a confederation with Moldova (and Transnistria) within the Union of Sovereign States, a confederation that was supposed to replace the Soviet Union. All parties were meant to independently sign the new union treaty; if Moldova refused to do so, Gagauzia (and Transnistria) reserved the right to join the treaty on its own.[20] Having been elected, Topal adopted the same position.[21] Further, some researchers refer to a vote taken together with the presidential elections as a referendum on independence.[22] In reality, the vast majority of people voted for "the independence of the Gagauz Republic within the political and economic Union of Sovereign States," where independence meant signature of the new union treaty independently from Moldova.[23]

[17] See Obrashchenie s"ezda narodnykh deputatov vsekh urovnei Gagauzskoi Respubliki ko vsem narodam i parlamentam Soiuza SSR, soiuznykh i avtonomnykh respublik, obshchestvennosti strany i mirovomu soobshchestvu, 1 sentiabria 1991, Komrat, in Kendigelian, *Gagauzskaia Respublika*, 294–95.
[18] Press-sluzhba Prezidenta PMR, August 24, 2011, accessed August 21, 2016, http://president.gospmr.ru/ru/news/25-avgusta-verhovnyy-sovet-pmssr-prinyal-deklaraciyu-o-nezavisimosti-nashey-strany.
[19] Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," *Nationalities Papers* 26, no. 1 (1998): 96, doi:10.1080/00905999808408552.
[20] *Znamia*, November 30, 1991.
[21] *Znamia*, December 19, 1991.
[22] See, for example, Alla Skvortsova, "The Cultural and Social Makeup of Moldova: A Bipolar or Dispersed Society?," in *National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies: The Cases of Estonia and Moldova*, ed. Pål Kolstø (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 190; Ivan Katchanovski, "Small Nations but Great Differences: Political Orientations and Cultures of the Crimean Tatars and the Gagauz," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 6 (2005): 885, doi:10.1080/09668130500199483; Ingvar Svanberg, "Gagauz," in *Ethnic groups of Europe: An encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey Cole (Santa Barbara, Calf.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 161.
[23] Ilia Karakash, interview by author, August 29, 2015, Odessa.

No Desire to Secede from Moldova

It might be said that when the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist in December 1991, the Gagauz Republic became a fully independent entity and sought international recognition. This, along with the referendum, may be a reason why Caspersen and Florea designated Gagauzia as a de facto state from 1991 onwards.[24] In fact, the Gagauz elites realised that disappearance of the state that they wanted to be a part of (and sought protection from) meant that the only solution was to come to an agreement with the Moldovan authorities. They also understood that Gagauzia was too small to go it alone.[25] The absence of the Gagauz authorities' secessionist intentions is also demonstrated by how they proceeded with state-building, understood as "the establishment of the administrative, economic, and military groundwork of functional states."[26]

The significant problem hindering institution-building was that the Gagauz Republic's authorities had scarce financial resources at their disposal. However, even more important is the fact that the Gagauz leadership deliberately delayed establishing state (mainly executive branch) institutions in order to help stabilise relations with Moldova and to facilitate negotiations on legal recognition of the republic by the Moldovan authorities.[27] Moreover, the Gagauz Republic's leadership sought cooperation with the Moldovan authorities to set up and develop regional non-political institutions such as a university, a television service and a bank.[28] Crucially, these institutions were referred to as the greatest achievements of the Gagauz Republic when its third anniversary was celebrated.[29] In addition, the presidents of Gagauzia and Moldova (Mircea Snegur) agreed in late-1993 to transform the Budjak Battalion – the main military unit of the Gagauz Republic – into a special military unit subordinated to Moldova's interior ministry and responsible for keeping public order in the Gagauz region.[30] Although it turned out to be a difficult process that was not finished before the Gagauz autonomous region was de facto established within Moldova in June 1995, the

[24] Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, 12; Florea, "De Facto States," 793.
[25] Karakash, interview; Judy Batt, "Federalism versus Nationalism in Post-Communist State-Building: The Case of Moldova," *Regional & Federal Studies* 7, no. 3 (1997): 41, doi:10.1080/13597569708421016; Webster, "Parliamentary Majorities," 73.
[26] Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, "Living with Non-recognition: State- and Nation-building in South Caucasian Quasi-states," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 3 (2008): 484, doi:10.1080/09668130801948158.
[27] Kendigelian, *Gagauzskaia Respublika*, 327.
[28] Stepan Varban, interview by author, July 9, 2015, Comrat; Andrei Cheshmezhdi, interview by author, October 29, 2015, phone conversation; Ilia Afanasev, interview by author, October 14, 2015, Comrat; Kendigelian, interview; Topal, interview.
[29] *Komratskie vesti*, August 21, 1993.
[30] *Komratskie vesti*, November 6, 1993; *Komratskie vesti*, November 27, 1993.

process nevertheless moved forward.[31] If the Gagauz had striven for full independence, it is doubtful whether they would have delayed establishing executive branch institutions of the Gagauz Republic, tried to legalise their regional non-political institutions in Moldova and agreed to subordinate their military structure to Moldova's authorities before striking a final deal on Gagauzia's status.

Interestingly, Keiji Sato refers to the steps taken by the Gagauz Republic to reach budgetary autonomy as a desire to detach from Moldova.[32] However, he misses the fact that the Gagauz bank, established in 1992, recognised its subordination to the central bank of Moldova and, while establishing their own budget in 1993, the Gagauz were ready to pay a federal tax (as they called it), towards the central budget.[33] Moreover, Topal clearly stated that establishment of the Gagauz budget did not mean detachment from Moldova.[34] Most certainly, financial ties with the Moldovan central budget were loosened but not cut off. With some exceptions between May and November 1993 when the Gagauz budget existed, taxes collected in the Gagauz area were sent to the Moldovan central budget.[35] It can be added that there were no attempts to introduce their own currency – i.e. to undertake one of actions mentioned by Caspersen that demonstrate clear aspirations for independence – or use money from any state other than Moldova.

By contrast, the Transnistrian leadership had actively engaged in establishing Transnistria's administrative, economic and military institutions since declaring independence from Moldova in September 1990 and then in August 1991. For example, a Transnistrian regional bank (a Transnistrian branch of the USSR Agroprombank) operating independently from the Moldovan banking system was established as early as April 1991. Then the process of separating Transnistrian and Moldovan budgets followed. Furthermore, an independent central bank of Transnistria was set up in December 1992 and a national currency – a Transnistrian rouble – was introduced in August 1994.[36] Another significant difference – as

[31] *Komratskie vesti*, February 5, 1994; *Komratskie vesti*, March 26, 1994; *Komratskie vesti*, November 5, 1994; Kendigelian, *Gagauzskaia Respublika*, 441–42.
[32] Keiji Sato, "Mobilization of Non-titular Ethnicities during the Last Years of the Soviet Union: Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the Lithuanian Poles," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 26 (2009): 156–57.
[33] *Panorama*, February 25, 1993.
[34] *Panorama*, August 26, 1993.
[35] On relations between local budgets of the Gagauz area and central budget of Moldova as well as on the budget of the Gagauz Republic see, for example, *Znamia*, December 17, 1991; *Komratskie vesti*, February 20, 1993; *Komratskie vesti*, November 13, 1993; *Komratskie vesti*, January 29, 1994; *Komratskie vesti*, November 5, 1994; Kendigelian, *Gagauzskaia Respublika*, 366–68.
[36] For more detailed account of state-building efforts undertaken by the Transnistrian authorities see "Kratkaia khronika osnovnykh sobytii," in *Entsiklopediia: Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublika* (Tiraspol', 2010). See also Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø, "From Secessionist Conflict Toward a Functioning State: Processes

Stuart J. Kaufman argues – is that the Transnistrian authorities, unlike the Gagauz leadership, strove for a war with Moldova.[37] Thanks to the support of the Russian Fourteenth Army, Transnistria won the war that ended in July 1992, sealing its de facto independence from Moldova.

Next, one may refer to Gagauzia's external activities to demonstrate that the Gagauz authorities sought full independence. For instance, Gagauzia's cooperation with other de facto states from the post-Soviet area – such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria – within a so-called commonwealth of unrecognised states may be seen as identifying with entities believed to be seeking independence (and, accordingly, may demonstrate Gagauz leadership's focus on securing independence). However, rather than seeking internationally recognised independence, leaders of these entities desired other forms of self-determination, including joining another state.[38] As noted by Caspersen – a supporter of the single-aim approach – in a number of de facto states independence claims "were initially more strategic than anything else; it was thought to improve their position at the negotiating table, or the goal of joining their kin-state was deemed even more elusive than the goal of independence."[39] Similarly, Gagauzia's adherence to Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in 1994 should not be seen as evidence of pursuing independence because its members have various political aspirations. The Gagauz representatives did not even take part in the activities of this organisation because of lack of funds.[40]

In fact, Gagauzia closely cooperated with Transnistria in political, military and economic spheres. However, Gagauzia's rationale behind this cooperation was to gain resources sustaining Gagauzia's de facto statehood and jointly led to (con)federalisation with Moldova and next, at some point and contrary to the Transnistrian elite's interests, to press the Moldovan authorities to grant territorial autonomy to the Gagauz.[41] Gagauzia also maintained relations with its quasi-kin-state, Turkey. While external powers often support de facto states

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of State- and Nation-Building in Transnistria," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2011), doi:10.2747/1060-586X.27.2.178.

[37] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 159–62.

[38] See, for example, Mikhail Volchonskii, Vladimir Zakharov and Nikolai Silaev, eds., *Konflikty v Abchazii i Juzhnoi Osetii: Dokumenty 1989–2006 gg.* (Moskva: Russkaia Panorama, 2008); Céline Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989–2008)* (Brussels: VUBPRESS, 2011); Levon Chorbajian, ed., *The Making of Nagorno-Karabagh: From Secession to Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

[39] Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, 57.

[40] Petr Zavrichko, interview by author, July 13, 2015, Comrat.

[41] *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 2, 1993; *Nezavisimaia Moldova*, May 29, 1993; *Nezavisimaia Moldova*, June 24, 1993.

established by their ethnic kin, Turkey restricted its cooperation with the Gagauz to cultural, education and economic issues and fully backed Moldova's territorial integrity, expressing its support only for granting the Gagauz territorial autonomy within Moldova.

Finally, as noted by Gagauzia's foreign minister, Petr Zavrichko, the abovementioned and other external activities were supposed to guarantee the republic's security, make the Gagauz issue known in the world and get support for the legalisation of the Gagauz de facto state as an entity within Moldova but not as an independent state.[42] Crucially, other representatives of the Gagauz leadership interviewed during this study stated unanimously that there was no intention to set up an independent, internationally recognised state.[43] Something similar was said to John A. Webster during his study made in the 2000s.[44]

Rationale behind not Seeking Independence

The Gagauz recognised their first parent state – the Soviet Union – as their homeland, and this is a crucial reason why they had no intention to secede from it. The point is that the Soviet Union was seen by them as a country with an advanced civilization and great Russian culture. It was also seen as a country that supported the social and economic advancement of the Gagauz who had been largely illiterate in the pre-Soviet period. The Soviet Union was also associated with peaceful inter-ethnic relations. When relations between the Gagauz and the Moldovans worsened at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the Soviet Union was perceived by the Gagauz as their protector. Indeed, it was Soviet troops (along with Transnistrian volunteers) that protected them when Moldovans attempted to crush the Gagauz Republic by force in October 1990. This positive image dates back to a period of the Russian-Turkish wars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. At that time, tsars of the Russian Empire – the predecessor of the Soviet Union – resettled fellow Gagauz Orthodox Christians from Dobrudja under the rule of the Muslim Ottoman Empire to southern Bessarabia, providing them with lands and privileges such as release from taxes and military service.[45] Interestingly,

[42] Petr Zavrichko, interview by Author, July 13, 2015, Comrat.
[43] For example, Kendigelian, interview; Topal, interview; Petr Pashaly, interview by author, July 9, 2015, Comrat; Leonid Dobrov, interview by author, July 11, 2015, Comrat; Fedor Marinoglo, interview by author, October 16, 2015, phone conversation.
[44] Webster, "Parliamentary Majorities," 73, n. 139.
[45] Diana Nikoglo, interview by author, July 6, 2015, Chișinău; Alla Paptsova, interview by author, July 10, 2015, Comrat; Katchanovski, "Small Nations but Great Differences," 887–91.

even in late-1993, Gagauz leaders recognised, at least mentally, that the Gagauz region was a part of the renewed Soviet Union.[46]

While researchers who claim that Gagauzia sought independence from its second parent state, Moldova, point out that this desire was finally relinquished because of the scarce resources of the republic, in fact, as emphasized by Ilia Karakash who authored the 1990 declaration proclaiming the Gagauz Republic, such weakness was the crucial factor in determining why the Gagauz had no such aspirations at all.[47] There were relatively few Gagauz and they were one of the most socio-economically, culturally and politically disadvantaged ethnic groups in Moldova, while many of the few well-educated Gagauz, mainly from outside the Gagauz region, were reluctant to support the Gagauz Republic. The Gagauz region was one of the poorest in Moldova: it was a backward agricultural area suffering from water shortage. The Gagauz Republic was territorially a small entity of no more than 2,000 km^2, additionally dismembered into four parts without territorial continuity. What is important to remember is that there were no external patrons ready to instigate and support the independence aspirations of the Gagauz – Turkey backed Moldova's territorial integrity, while Russia focused almost exclusively on Transnistria.[48]

Additionally, Kaufman explains the moderate position of the Gagauz elites taking into account the fact that they were unable to sustain their people's motivation due to the absence of widespread nationalist myths and symbols given that the Gagauz identity had been very weak until the end of the 1980s.[49] This is confirmed by Topal who says that it is likely that if Moldova had delayed matters for a year, people's motivation would have been so low that the Gagauz region would have been reintegrated by Moldova as a regular region.[50] Another demobilising factor identified by Kaufman was the limiting immediate physical threat to the Gagauz imposed by Moldova.[51] Indeed, after the October 1990 march of Moldovan volunteers to the Gagauz Republic, there were no further open confrontations with Moldova and the parties continued talking about conflict resolution. The Popular Front of Moldova lost much influence because of Moldova's defeat in the 1992 war with Transnistria and finally lost power in the aftermath of the 1994 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, Moldovan authorities became more and more willing to accommodate the Gagauz, hoping that striking a

[46] *Pravda*, September 4, 1993.
[47] Karakash, interview.
[48] See Chinn and Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," 93–94; Charles King, "Minorities Policy in the post-Soviet Republics: The Case of the Gagauzi," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20, no. 4 (1997): 740–43, 746–47, doi:10.1080/01419870.1997.9993987.
[49] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 161–62.
[50] Topal, interview.
[51] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 161–62.

deal with the Gagauz elites would help to resolve a conflict with another breakaway region of Transnistria.[52]

By contrast, Transnistrian leadership had more assets and could pursue a more radical agenda toward Moldova. Transnistria was the most industrialised region of Moldova and had one of the highest education rates in Moldova. The Russophone population, mainly industrial workers, was well-organised and easily mobilised on the basis of Soviet and Russian myths and symbols. Transnistrian authorities could count on the sympathy, if not overt support, of Russia (and its predecessor, the Soviet Union). Crucially, the Russian Fourteenth Army stationing in the Transnistrian region intervened during the 1992 war on behalf of Transnistrians to defeat Moldovan forces that tried to crush the Transnistrian de facto state. The victory in the war helped to sustain people's mobilisation and made it harder for Transnistrian leadership to relinquish Transnistria's de facto independence and accept the region's reintegration into Moldova.[53]

Autonomism as a Desired Status

The previous sections have provided various arguments that the Gagauz authorities did not seek secession from Gagauzia's two parent states – the Soviet Union and then Moldova – meaning they did not desire internationally recognised independence. These sections have also mentioned a few real goals pursued by the Gagauz leadership, all falling under autonomism. However, this is only a fragmentary account and, therefore, it is necessary to refer to the literature studies on Gagauzia to get a full picture of the aspirations of the Gagauz authorities.

Researchers who have studied the Gagauz national movement and its conflict with the central Moldovan authorities made two assertions concerning the status of Gagauzia that the Gagauz leadership was striving for. The first is that the Gagauz desired territorial autonomy from the very beginning of their political mobilisation. Broadly speaking, the Gagauz Republic sought autonomy within Soviet and then independent Moldova and, additionally, within the Soviet Union (independently from the Soviet republic of Moldova) during its existence. Accordingly, any other possible outcomes, even if declared explicitly by the

[52] See Paula Thompson, "The Gagauz in Moldova and Their Road to Autonomy," in *Managing diversity in plural societies: Minorities, migration and nation-building in post-Communist Europe*, ed. Magdalena Opalski (Ottawa: Forum Eastern Europe, 1998), 136–37.
[53] See Chinn and Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," 93–94; Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 129–160.

Gagauz, are dismissed.[54] A more focused view is that autonomy was desired just within (Soviet and then independent) Moldova: establishment of the Gagauz Republic was not perceived by the Gagauz as a separation from Moldova, but rather as a temporary yet necessary step towards achieving territorial autonomy within the parent (sub)state. This strategy is seen as a lever over the Moldovan authorities to take the issue of the autonomy forward. Other declarations issued by the Gagauz are also interpreted in the same way.[55]

The second and arguably most common assertion is that before the Gagauz agreed on territorial autonomy within Moldova, they had tried to implement at least one of the following strategies: creation of a republic within the Soviet Union (usually denoted as a Union-level republic), formation of a federation/confederation with Soviet and then independent Moldova (and Transnistria), and establishment of a fully independent state.[56] This belief is based mainly on the various declarations and statements made by the Gagauz.

The first major assertion regarding Gagauzia's overall strategy may be undermined by solely focusing on territorial autonomy while dismissing other goals, despite numerous declarations made by the Gagauz regarding (con)federalisation. Although the second claim does take this into account, its drawbacks centre on highlighting a bid for outright independence and downplaying the aim of achieving territorial autonomy as a last resort. The point here is that acquiring territorial autonomy within Moldova was the most parsimonious tactic for the Gagauz leadership, as it emerged at the very beginning of their political mobilisation and was probably the most achievable.

With the exception of full independence, it is clear that the alternative strategies identified in the literature do not assume secession of Gagauzia from its both parent states falling under autonomism. Thus, it can be said that the Gagauz sought a measure of self-governance – be it territorial autonomy or (con)federalisation – within states that their territories were part of, namely the Soviet Union and Moldova. This is confirmed by Kendigelian, one of the most radical Gagauz politicians. He maintains that the principal

[54] Webster, "Parliamentary Majorities." See also Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 160–62.

[55] Mariia Marunevich, *Kurs lektsii dlia vuza: Istoriia gagauzskogo naroda (uchebnoe posobie)* (Komrat, 2003), 158–59; Valerii Lazarev, interview by author, November 1, 2015, Skype conversation. See also Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 217; Claus Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation: The Case of the Gagauz Territorial Autonomy in the Republic of Moldova," in *Minority Governance in Europe*, ed. Kinga Gál (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2002), 119.

[56] See, for example, Batt, "Federalism versus Nationalism;" Chinn and Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia;" Sato, "Mobilization of Non-titular Ethnicities;" Zabarah, "Opportunity Structures;" Thompson, "The Gagauz in Moldova," 133–135; Paul Kubicek, "Structure, Agency, and Secessionism in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet States," in *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America's Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements*, ed. Don H. Doyle (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 291.

objective was to legalise the Gagauz Republic, meaning that different, but non-secessionist, variants were considered.[57]

While supporters of the single-aim approach note that the goal of independence can be dropped and a deal struck with the parent state, resulting in peaceful reintegration of the de facto state, the Gagauz leadership sought autonomism from the outset of the Gagauz de facto state. Yet, it should be added that during negotiations on reintegration of the Gagauz de facto state into Moldova, the Gagauz Republic's authorities demanded the right to external self-determination for the Gagauz region if Moldova changed its status as an independent state (i.e. if Moldova reunited with Romania). What is significant is that such a right was provided by the Moldovan authorities in the 1994 law on the Gagauz territorial autonomy within Moldova.

Conclusions and Further Developments

Although the prevailing view in the literature is that de facto states seek internationally recognised independence, the Gagauz Republic did not pursue the goal of independence. This is demonstrated by the statements and behaviour of the Gagauz Republic's authorities in the first half of 1990 and interviews conducted in 2015 with the former leadership of the republic and activists of the Gagauz national movement. The fact that independence was not an objective of the Gagauz elites, however, should not mean that Gagauzia cannot be designated as a de facto state. While the single-aim approach prevails in the scholarship on de facto states, researchers have recently started challenging this rather blinkered perspective.[58] Crucially, they have identified goals other than independence – mainly integration into or association with another state – in the case of many polities universally recognised as de facto states, such as the contemporary Eurasian entities of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria.[59] Therefore, the goal of independence does not seem to be a necessary attribute of de facto states.

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[57] Kendigelian, interview.

[58] For example, Giorgio Comai, "Conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions" (paper presented at the conference "Europe, Nations, and Insecurity: Challenges to Identities," Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, June 30–July 2, 2016); Toomla, *De facto states*, 56; Pål Kolstø and Davor Paukovic, "The Short and Brutish Life of Republika Srpska Krajina: Failure of a De Facto State," *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2013): 310–11, doi:10.1080/17449057.2013.864805; Marcin Kosienkowski, "Is internationally recognised independence the goal of quasi-states? The case of Transnistria," in *Moldova: In search of its own place in Europe*, ed. Natalia Cwicinskaja and Piotr Oleksy (Bydgoszcz: Epigram, 2013).

[59] See, for example, Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø, "Dynamics of de facto statehood: The South Caucasian de facto states between secession and sovereignty," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 292–93, doi:10.1080/14683857.2012.686013; Sergey Markedonov, "De Facto Statehood in Eurasia: A Political

Instead of seeking internationally recognised independence, the Gagauz Republic's leadership pursued autonomism, wanting to change the position of the Gagauz region within its two subsequent parent states – the Soviet Union and then Moldova. The Gagauz authorities considered different variants including autonomy, federal and confederal arrangements; finally, they agreed on territorial autonomy within Moldova. Importantly, the Gagauz Republic is not the only example that the goal of autonomism is a viable alternative strategy for de facto states. Another example is Northern Cyprus, a contemporary entity within the Republic of Cyprus, universally recognised in the literature as a de facto state. More than a decade ago, its authorities adopted a federalist strategy, which itself is a form of autonomism.[60] Yet, it should be added that the Gagauz and Cypriot cases are not exactly the same: one difference is that the Gagauz elites permanently sought autonomism from the outset of the Gagauz Republic, while the leadership of Northern Cyprus has dropped the goal of independence and started pursuing the aim of autonomism.

As regards the rationale behind not seeking independence from the Soviet Union, the point was that the Gagauz perceived this state (and its predecessor – Russia) as their homeland. In the case of Gagauzia's subsequent parent state, Moldova, Gagauz leadership did not pursue independence because of scarce resources, modest opportunities to mobilise people and the absence of an external patron willing to instigate and support separatist claims. Things somehow changed when Russia interpreted the European Union's involvement, increasing since the mid-2000s, in certain post-Soviet republics as interference into the Russian sphere of influence and applied various counter-measures, such as imposing embargoes, activating pro-Russian groups and regions, and even launching covert military aggression as happened in Ukraine (it began in winter 2014 when the Euromaidan movement, explicitly pro-EU in its origins, ousted former President Viktor Yanukovych). It was Moldova that was one the former Soviet republics that declared European integration as its top priority and closely cooperated with the EU, especially since pro-European parties came to power in 2009, while autonomous Gagauzia was one of the pro-Russian regions. What is significant is that Gagauz elites decided to use the rivalry between Russia and the EU for their own benefit.[61]

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and Security Phenomenon," *Caucasus Survey* 3, no. 3 (2015): 196, doi:10.1080/23761199.2015.1086565; Scott Pegg and Eiki Berg, "Lost and Found: The WikiLeaks of De Facto State-Great Power Relations," *International Studies Perspectives*, 2015, 7, doi:10.1111/insp.12078.

[60] Daria Isachenko, *The making of informal states: Statebuilding in Northern Cyprus and Transdniestria* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 156–57.

[61] See Theodor Tudoroiu, "Unfreezing failed frozen conflicts: A post-Soviet case study," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.1080/14782804.2015.1117968; Cristian Cantir, "Russian-Backed Paradiplomacy in the 'Near Abroad': Gagauzia, Moldova and the Rift over European Integration," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 10, no. 3 (2015), doi:10.1163/1871191X-12341315.

In February 2014, Gagauzia's authorities organised a referendum, which was declared illegal by the Moldovan central authorities. The vast majority of voters supported Moldova's integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union instead of the EU and backed the proposition that, if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, Gagauzia would automatically become an independent republic. Essentially, the latter should be seen as reinforcing the right envisaged in the 1994 law on Gagauz autonomy. Just as in the 1990s, loss of sovereignty could be a reference to union with Romania, however, some analysts claimed further integration with the EU could also constitute a loss of sovereignty. For example, Theodor Tudoroiu claims that the outgoing governor (*bashkan*) of Gagauzia, Mihail Formuzal, led by a desire to preserve and extend his power, intended to proclaim Gagauzia's independence in June 2014, a day after Moldova and the EU were to sign the Association Agreement. Further, Tudoroiu argues that having received some military support from Russia and expecting further endorsement similar to that provided by Moscow to pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Formuzal was ready to go to war with Moldova in order to create a Transnistria-type de facto state. Ultimately, Formuzal did not proclaim independence. According to Tudoroiu, the most probable reason behind this decision was that Russia abandoned its plans to launch or support military operations outside Eastern Ukraine.[62]

Although Formuzal did use Euroskeptic and separatist rhetoric, it is unlikely that he really wanted to proclaim independence for Gagauzia. The point is that both the Gagauz elites and the population did not want war like in Eastern Ukraine that most likely would follow their declaration of independence. Moreover, as a de facto state, just like in the case of Transnistria, Gagauzia would face international isolation and political and economic dependence on Russia. Crucially, Euroskeptic and separatist rhetoric alone was enough for the Gagauz elites to gain resources. Such rhetoric allowed them to mobilise a local electorate, obtain rewards from Russia for Anti-European activism and receive concessions from the central authorities and Western governments and organisations wanting to stabilise the situation.[63] All in all, it appears that for the Gagauz elites, it is more beneficial if Gagauzia remains a part of Moldova.

[62] Tudoroiu, "Unfreezing failed frozen conflicts," 383–91.

[63] Kamil Całus, "Gagauzia: Growing separatism in Moldova?," *OSW Commentary*, no. 129 (10.03.2014): 7–8, accessed September 8, 2016, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_129.pdf; Institutul de Politici Publice, "Barometrul Opiniei Publice: Octombrie–Noiembrie 2014," 16–17, accessed September 8, 2016, http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura_BOP_11.2014_prima_parte-r.pdf; Marcin Kosienkowski and William Schreiber, *Moldova's National Minorities: Why are they Euroskeptical?*, Russie.Nei.Visions 81 (Paris: IFRI, 2014), 12, 15.

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