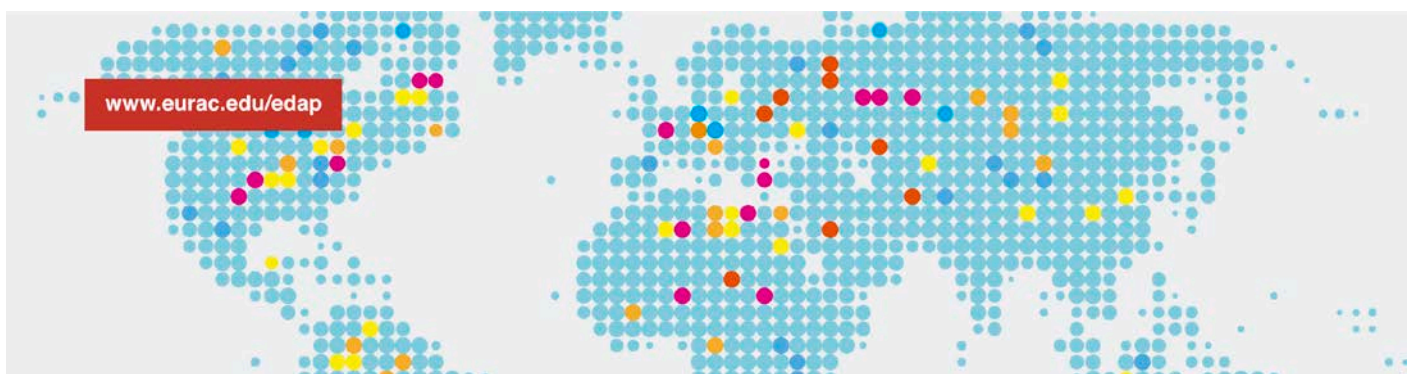


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Making or Breaking the Republic of Moldova? The Autonomy of Gagauzia

Siegfried Wöber



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Abstract

This article describes the process of self-determination and the creation of a territorial autonomy of the Gagauz people in the Republic of Moldova. It also analyses the situation in the autonomy after the change of government in Chisinau in 2009 and evaluates the current status of accommodation of the Gagauz' interests in the country. Aspects of state-building and the influence of external actors are explored as well. Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) is one of the first post-Soviet autonomies. Since its establishment in 1994, no violent conflict has taken place there. However, the Gagauz language and culture remain relatively unprotected, and incentives as well as support for the integration of the Gagauz are low. The article outlines the potential for future disputes between the central government and local authorities, due to continuous attempts to limit Gagauzia's self-governance and conflicting interpretations of how the autonomy should work. Furthermore, struggles between Gagauz political leaders and other local realities hamper the successful realization of Gagauz Yeri.

With respect to Moldova's efforts to resolve the Transnistrian conflict and to integrate with the European Union, compromises and cooperation through an ongoing dialogue between the centre and autonomy are clearly due. Resolving the remaining stumbling blocks could make Gagauzia a living, rather than symbolic autonomy.

Author

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Key words

minority rights - Gagauz - Gagauzia - Republic of Moldova - territorial autonomy - state-building.

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Making or Breaking the Republic of Moldova? The Autonomy of Gagauzia

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1. Introduction

The Republic of Moldova¹ is frequently referred to as 'Europe's poorest country', and mainly receives attention in connection with its unresolved Transnistria conflict. It is less often that the European public hears about its diverse population, positive multicultural experiences and multiple identities, originating from its geographic position as a borderland of Europe.

The academic community has turned its attention to the country after it gained independence in 1991 and faced two secessionist confrontations. The stand-off with the Gagauz people in the south was resolved peacefully and gave birth to one of the first post-Soviet autonomies - the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) - Gagauzia/Gagauz Yeri. The conflicts arising in the country at the end of the Soviet Union period - Moldovan versus Soviet or Russian nationalism - were complemented by a coinciding historical difference - past association with Romania versus Russia - and an ideological divide - pro-Communists versus anti-Communists.² In the 1980s, the country, where minorities make up about 25 per cent of the population, seemed calm and far from conflict. Moldova had no history of widespread communal violence nor faced a situation where religious beliefs were separating ethnic minorities from the majority.³ Furthermore, the percentage of inter-ethnic marriages was high, especially in urban settlements.⁴

In 1992, an armed conflict with Transnistria broke out and led to the de facto independence of the region on the left bank of the Dniester as well as of some exclaves - the city of Bender and its near-by localities on the west

¹ Concerning terminology, the author of this paper will use the labels 'Moldova' and 'Moldovan' to refer to the corresponding republic and its citizens respectively. The unrecognized state in eastern Moldova, the Dnestr Moldovan Republic (Republica Moldovenească Nistreană in Moldovan/Romanian, Приднестровская Молдавская Республика/Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika in Russian), will be referred to as 'Transnistria', and Găgăuzia/Gagauziya as 'Gagauzia', as is commonly done by international organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

² Stuart J. Kaufmann, "Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses, and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War", 21(2) *International Security* (1996), 108-138, at 127.

³ Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States", in 53(4) *World Politics* (2001), 524-552, at 532.

⁴ Vasile Dumbrava, *Sprachkonflikt und Sprachbewusstsein in der Republik Moldova: Eine empirische Studie in gemischtethnischen Familien* [Language Conflict and Consciousness in the Republic of Moldova: An Empirical Study in Mixed Families] (Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 37.

bank of the river.⁵ While this conflict has not been resolved and continues to dominate the political discussion in the country, the outcome of the Gagauz' struggle for self-determination was largely based on a peaceful process, as will be described in the subsequent sections.⁶

There exist different opinions about the implementation of the relatively unknown autonomy of Gagauzia and its success. This article aims to contribute to the discussion on how to solve conflicts of an ethnic nature and how to accommodate minorities through territorial autonomies by shedding further light on this part of the world and its current state of affairs, in particular after a new coalition came into power in 2009 in the Republic of Moldova. This change of government ended the reign of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (Party of Communists), and official Chisinau turned its foreign policy vector towards the West, with the European Union (EU) starting to play a more active role in the country. At the same time, the questions of national identity, how to organize the state and which geopolitical directions to take are on the daily agenda of this relatively young, democratizing state. The influence of the Russian Federation is still strong and one part of society - especially Russian-speakers - is very nostalgic about Soviet times and institutions.

The following research questions are the focus of this article:

- Which aspects of the Gagauz Yeri autonomy work well or raise concerns?
- What is the current status of accommodation of Gagauz' interests in Moldova and which factors influence this minority-state relationship?
- How does Gagauz Yeri contribute to Moldova's state-building process?

⁵ Jos Havermans, "Moldova: Peace Organizations Search for Lasting Settlement", in Paul van Tongeren, Hans van de Veen and Juliette Verhoeven (eds.), *Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2002), 280-282.

⁶ This article is based on the author's master's thesis "Making or Breaking the Republic of Moldova? The Case of the Autonomy of Gagauzia", prepared as part of the Interdisciplinary Balkan Studies postgraduate master's degree course of the University of Vienna (2011), and is complemented by follow-up research (2012). Interviews were conducted with more than 20 persons, including three (out of four) MPs from Gagauzia in the parliament, the Bashkan, the Speaker of the People's Assembly, leaders of the two main political movements of the autonomy, experts in Chisinau - among them also persons who were already active in politics in the 1980s/1990s - as well as representatives of think tanks working on/with/in Gagauzia, civil society actors from the autonomy and experts of Gagauz history and culture. Other background talks involved diplomats and representatives of the EU and the OSCE. For a list of interview partners see the bibliography.

2. Gagauzia: Determination within Moldova

2.1. The Gagauz - Who Are They (Said to Be)?

2.1.1. Historical and Cultural Overview

There are 25 theses⁷ about the origin of the Gagauz, who are Orthodox Christians with a Turkic language.⁸ The two main hypotheses are based on a Turkic against a non-Turkic origin, but with insufficient historiographic evidence to confirm one version.⁹ Differing explanations are known for the origins of their ethnonym, while certain facts tend to support a non-Turkic etymological root. The name itself was first mentioned in written sources in the eighteenth century.¹⁰

About 155,000 ethnic Gagauz live in the south of Moldova.¹¹ In 1989, about 36,000 were registered in the Odessa oblast of Ukraine, and by 2012 a few representatives could also be found in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania.¹² Figures in relation to those in Bulgaria vary greatly, but it is reported that the Gagauz that live there are aware of their ethnic background. The ones that migrated to Turkey in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the ones living in Romania, are mostly assimilated.¹³ The Gagauz language belongs to the southwest division of Turkic languages and is strongly influenced by Romanian and Russian, and increasingly the Turkish language.¹⁴ As Orthodox Christians, the Gagauz felt repression in the Ottoman Empire and probably started to leave Bulgaria. Some of them also used to refer to their group as 'Christian Bulgarians'.¹⁵ It is widely accepted that they migrated to the south of Moldova, then Bessarabia, in several waves starting in the 1780s. Together with Bulgarians, they finally settled in the steppes of the Budshak during the Russian-Turkish wars.¹⁶

⁷ Thomas Gassler, "Die Gagauzen: Eine mustergültige Minderheit" [The Gagauz: A Model Minority], *Eurasisches Magazin*, 2009, 11, at <http://www.eurasischesmagazin.de/artikel/?artikelID=20091111>.

⁸ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Hoover Press, Stanford, 1999), 210.

⁹ Astrid Menz, "The Gagauz", in Ergun Çağatay and Doğan Kuban (eds.), *The Turkish-Speaking People: 2000 Years of Art and Culture from Inner Asia to the Balkans* (Prestel, Munich, 2006), 371-383, at 373-374.

¹⁰ Menz, "The Gagauz" ..., 376.

¹¹ Gassler, "Die Gagauzen ...".

¹² Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia", 26(1) *Nationalities Papers* (1998), 87-101, at 87-88.

¹³ Menz, "The Gagauz ...", 371; Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal (advisor to the Bashkan; elected president of the self-proclaimed Gagauz Soviet Socialist Republic; interviewed on 22 July 2011 in Comrat) also mentioned this in an expert talk, underlining the Gagauz' fear of assimilation in Moldova.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 379-380; Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh (Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, head of the sector for Gagauz ethnology; 25 July 2011 - Chisinau) explained in an expert talk that there existed a southern dialect, which was closer to Turkish, and a central dialect, which had less common elements.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 375-379.

¹⁶ King, *The Moldovans ...*, 209-211. Unlike (most) other minorities in Moldova, they cannot appeal to a kin-state as a 'protector' abroad.

During the Russian Empire, the Gagauz had a number of privileges, such as exemption from military service and taxes.¹⁷ In 1906, the Russian Revolution reached the southern border of the empire, where the Republic of Comrat was soon established.¹⁸ During the Romanian period, especially the second one after 1918, they were under pressure to assimilate, to resettle to Romania, as well as being obliged to do military service and to speak Romanian.¹⁹ In 1944, Stalin sent thousands of them to labour camps.²⁰ About half of the Gagauz died in the post-war famine (1946-47); however, they did not associate this artificially created famine with Soviet policy about them.²¹ Under Soviet rule, modernization reached the Gagauz in the form of the collectivization and mechanization of agricultural production, and education was made available for all parts of the population. The Cyrillic alphabet was introduced in 1957;²² from 1962 onwards education was conducted in Russian only.²³

Between 1941 and 1989, the Gagauz made up 3.5 per cent to 4.9 per cent of the overall population of Moldova, ranging between 115,700 and 153,458 people.²⁴ Only 4 per cent of Gagauz mentioned Moldovan (Romanian) as their second language in 2004, compared to 73 per cent considering themselves fluent in Russian.²⁵ The Soviet period thereby meant a wide Russification of this geographically isolated people.²⁶

2.1.2. Identity Issues

A study²⁷ about the Crimean Tatars and the (Moldovan) Gagauz shows that the pro-Russian and pro-Communist orientation among the Gagauz (in contrast to the Tatars, also Turkic people, that gained autonomy after the break-up of the Soviet Union) was formed by a number of historical experiences: discrimination and persecution because of being Orthodox Christians during the Ottoman Empire; mass migration to the Bessarabia region under the

¹⁷ Menz, "The Gagauz" ..., 378.

¹⁸ N. N. Tufar, *Комратская Республика. 1906 год.* [*The Republic of Comrat. Year 1906.*] (Samisdat, Comrat, 2009). Expert Ivan Grec (historian, writer, former MP; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau) called this 5-day entity a product of a social movement.

¹⁹ Menz, "The Gagauz" ..., 378. Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh said that probably every Gagauz heard bad stories about this time; the Romanians also treated the Moldovans badly, and there even existed a plan to terminate small nations.

²⁰ Stephen R. Bowers et al., "The Moldovan Confederation Conundrum", in *Issues of the Post-Communist Transition: Structure, Culture, and Justice* (2001), 66, at http://works.bepress.com/stephen_bowers/19/.

²¹ Ivan Katchanovski, "Small Nations but Great Differences: Political Orientations and Cultures of the Crimean Tatars and the Gagauz", 57(6) *Europe-Asia Studies* (2005), 877-894, at 890.

²² During a short cultural renaissance in the 1930s, the priest Mihail Ciachir put together the first dictionary of the language.

²³ Claus Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation: The Case of the Gagauz Territorial Autonomy in the Republic of Moldova", in Gal Kinga (ed.), *Minority Governance in Europe* (LGI/ECMI, Budapest, 2002), 105-123, at 106.

²⁴ William Crowther, "The Politics of Democratization in Postcommunist Moldova", in Karen Dawish and Bruce Parrott (eds.), *Democratic Changes and Authoritarian Reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), 282-329, at 287.

²⁵ Dumbrava, *Sprachkonflikt* ..., 29.

²⁶ King, *The Moldovans* ..., 211-213.

²⁷ Ivan Katchanovski, "Small Nations but Great Differences ...", 877-894.

Russian Czar; certain (negative) historical experiences in Romania;²⁸ and the Soviet Union (a mainly positive experience). Socialization in the family and religion played important roles in identity building as well; they helped to store historical memory, transfer political culture²⁹ and build the basis of an identity in the making.³⁰ In this process, the Gagauz did not choose polarization against Moldovans.³¹

Despite their Turkic language, and certain affinities towards official Turkey, as will be discussed later, Gagauz working in Turkey are generally perceived to be Christians and Russians.³² Orthodoxy has also played a role in separating the Gagauz from a Turkish identity and keeping them under the influence of Russian culture.³³ The latter's impact was especially strong during the Communist period as the Gagauz then witnessed cultural progress and economic development of their relatively poor region. This period also provided the basis for a national awakening and the Gagauz' wish to take their people's faith in their own hands.

2.2. The Way to Gagauzian Self-Rule

2.2.1. Gagauz Awakening

In the 1980s, a Moldovan national movement came into being in the capital, and Gagauz intellectuals formed the basis of a cultural awakening in the south.³⁴ On the back of ethnic mobilization in the Gorbachev era,³⁵ in 1989 a Gagauz cultural club was established in the region's capital Comrat, soon turning itself into a political organization called Gagauz Halki (Gagauz people).³⁶

²⁸ For instance, Jerzy Hatlas and Marek Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities: The Case Study of Gagauzian Autonomy* (UAM, Poznan, 2008). While different perceptions about the Romanian period/s exist, the general narrative is a negative one in the Gagauz community. However, at the end of World War I, the Gagauz were first recognized as a separate ethnos by Romania.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hülya Demirdirek, "The Painful Past Retold: Social Memory in Azerbaijan and Gagauzia", paper presented at the conference 'Postkommunismens Antropologi', 12-14 April 1996, Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, at http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/D/Demirdirek_H_01.htm. Demirdirek also points out that there was no place called Gagauzia before and it turned into reality through "practice and narration".

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² Leyla J. Keough, "Globalizing 'Postsocialism': Mobile Mothers and Neoliberalism on the Margins of Europe", 79(3) *Anthropological Quarterly* (2006), 431-461.

³³ Andrei Avram, *Territorial Autonomy of the Gagauz in the Republic of Moldova: A Case Study* (Moldova-Institut, Leipzig, 2010), 9-10. He also outlines how the religious revival was coupled with Gagauz culture.

³⁴ Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...", 106.

³⁵ John A. Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities and National Minorities: Moldova's Accommodation of the Gagauz* (dissertation at Oxford University, 2007), 33. He quotes a study that showed that out of 40 mobilizing nationalities during this period, the Gagauz were the only ones without any form of ethno-territorial structure to support their demands.

³⁶ King, *The Moldovans ...*, 215. For a detailed chronology on the Gagauz in Moldova from the 1980s, see Minorities at Risk, "The Gagauz in Moldova", 16 July 2010, at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/chronology.asp?groupid=35901>.

The subsequent development of Gagauz nationalism and striving for self-determination was based on the goal of a territorial solution, which should take place through either a legislative change or a unilateral declaration of autonomy.³⁷ The leaders of the self-determination movement connected the striving for autonomy to the controversy over the state language in order to receive wider support for their ideas. While they understood the Moldovan wish to strengthen their language as something similar to their own goals, the new 1989 Language Law (Law No 3465 dated 1 September 1989, "Functioning of Languages on the Territory of the Moldavian SSR") raised concern nevertheless. Demands by certain groups for a union of Moldova with neighbouring Romania further stirred fears in the non-Moldovan population.³⁸

2.2.2. A Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

On 12 November 1989, an assembly in Comrat proclaimed a Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, within the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, a step that was condemned as unlawful by central authorities in Chisinau.³⁹ This move by the Gagauz was in reaction to weakening chances of receiving support for their demands for autonomy.⁴⁰ The confrontation continued in the following months, nearly leading to armed clashes, and the Gagauz were further alienated from the Moldovans.⁴¹

In another development, elections were organized and in October 1990 Stepan Topal was elected as the chairman of the Gagauz Supreme Soviet. The setting up of this political structure further strengthened the already focused and clear demands around territorial autonomy.⁴² The political strife of the Gagauz was also fostered by other actions of the government: in 1990, for instance, it officially endorsed a report calling them a national minority, rather than a people or a nation, and stating that their homeland was Bulgaria.⁴³

2.2.3. Talks between Chisinau and Comrat

When the Soviet Union dissolved at the end of 1991, the Gagauz limited their lobbying to authorities in Chisinau. Negotiations on the draft law "On the Statute of the Gagauz Self-administered Territory" within a bilateral

³⁷ Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities ...*, 61-62.

³⁸ On 31 August 1989, the Republic's Supreme Soviet passed a new version of the state language law that was clearly favourable to the Moldovan/Romanian-speaking majority. King, *The Moldovans ...*, 215; William Crowther, "The Politics of Democratization ...", 292; Martha Brill Olcott, "The Soviet (Dis)Union", 82 *Foreign Policy* (1991), 118-136.

³⁹ Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...", 107.

⁴⁰ Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities ...*, 63.

⁴¹ King, *The Moldovans ...*, 70-71 and 216-217.

⁴² Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities ...*, 71-76.

⁴³ Hülya Demirdirek, "Living in the Present: The Gagauz in Moldova", 178(1) *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* (2000), at http://condor.depaul.edu/rrotenbe/aeer/aeer18_1.html, 67-71, at 68. Nikolai Telpiz (Deputy Head of the New Gagauzia public movement; 21 July 2011 - Comrat) recalled that the Gagauz wanted an international commission to acknowledge them as a 'nation', but Moldova was against it.

commission started in mid-1992.⁴⁴ During the following months the Gagauz were waiting for a continuation of the talks.⁴⁵ In 1992, the armed conflict in Transnistria broke out and led to the de facto independence of this region.⁴⁶ Unlike the elites on the other side of the Dniester, the Gagauz had not desired a full separation from Moldova.⁴⁷ Contact with Chisinau did not completely break down but it took until 1994, when the centre-left Agrarian Democrats came into power, until things moved again in the negotiation framework. President Mircea Snegur visited Comrat a few times before the parliamentary elections - in which the pan-Romanians were ultimately defeated - and joined the new government in voicing support for some sort of autonomy for the Gagauz districts.⁴⁸

The period between 1989 and 1994 could be thought non-productive, but in the end it was a prelude to the power-sharing agreement that followed.⁴⁹ The current elite in Comrat believe that external players also had an important role in relation to the inception of autonomy, especially the then President of Turkey, Suleyman Demirel, as well as the Russian military that intervened just in time to prevent bloodshed.⁵⁰

2.3. Territorial Autonomy - The Birth of Gagauzia

2.3.1. The Establishment of Gagauz Yeri

After a series of consultations, also with experts of the Council of Europe (CoE),⁵¹ and further debate, on 23 December 1994 the Moldovan parliament passed the Law on the Special Juridical Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) - "Autonomy Statute". Two safeguarding measures were introduced: any changes to the law would require a three-fifth's majority vote in the parliament in Chisinau, and any enactments infringing on the powers of Gagauzia should be annulled by the Moldovan Constitutional Court. On the same day, the parliament of Moldova also passed

⁴⁴ Nikolai Telpiz pointed out that about seven Gagauz sessions were held in the negotiation period, where up to 800 people discussed the progress and content of the negotiation process.

⁴⁵ Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities ...*, 73. He points out that in his interviews with leading figures of the movement, all stressed that, "there was never any serious effort to establish an independent state".

⁴⁶ Jos Havermans, "Moldova: Peace Organizations ...", 280-282. Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh explained that Gagauz also died on the Moldovan side in this conflict.

⁴⁷ King, *The Moldovans*, 216-217.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

⁴⁹ Järve Priit, "Gagauzia and Moldova: Experiences in Power-Sharings", in Marc Weller (ed.), *Settling Self-Determination Disputes: Complex Power-Sharing in Theory and Practice* (Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden, 2008), 307-343, at 311. Nikolai Telpiz, who was part of the commission on the Gagauz side, explained that this period saw a number of negotiation rounds.

⁵⁰ Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh as well as Mihail Macar Formuzal (Bashkan of Gagauzia, former mayor of Ciadur-Lunga; 21 July 2011 - Comrat); see also Keiji Sato, "Mobilizing of Non-Titular Ethnicities during the Last Years of the Soviet Union: Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the Lithuanian Poles", 26 *Acta Slavica Iaponica* (2009), 141-157, at 151, at <http://hdl.handle.net/2115/39575>.

⁵¹ The role of the then OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel, should be highlighted as well. See, e.g., Stefan Troebst, "A Tribute to Max van der Stoel", 6 July 2012, at www.ecmi.de/about/about-ecmi/a-tribute-to-max-von-der-stoel/.

a resolution calling on the government to bring its own enactments into accord with the law.⁵²

On 5 March 1995, a referendum was held in 36 localities where the Gagauz either comprised more than 50 per cent of the population or where one-third of the locals initiated it. This led to the current structure of Gagauzia, which is comprised of 3 towns and 29 villages, altogether covering 1,848 km². According to the latest census in 2004, Gagauz represent 82.1 per cent of the 155,646 inhabitants of Gagauz Yeri, Bulgarians make up 5.1 per cent, Moldovans 4.8 per cent, Russians 3.8 per cent and Ukrainians 3.2 per cent.⁵³ After the referendum, the original administrative infrastructure changed and the administration of this now dispersed 'autonomous territory' became difficult.⁵⁴ This also had an effect on the Taraclia district, which hosts the Bulgarian minority, as Bulgarian-dominated villages chose not to join the autonomy, except for the ethnically mixed village of Kirsovo.⁵⁵ On 28 May 1995, Georgi Tabunshik was elected Gagauzia's first official leader, and in August of the same year Moldova granted amnesty to Gagauz movement activists.⁵⁶

2.3.2. Main Points and Criticism of the Autonomy Statute

In Article 1, the Autonomy Statute defines Gagauz-Yeri as an autonomous territorial unit, with a special status as a form of self-determination, representing an integral part of the Republic of Moldova.⁵⁷ Paragraph 4 of the first Article also says that in the event of a change in the status of the Republic to be no longer an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination.⁵⁸ Highly criticized by right-wing forces in the country, this point represented an important provision for the Gagauz whose collective memory of a united Romanian-Moldovan state was negative.⁵⁹

The Gagauz-Yeri is headed by a Governor (Bashkan), who is elected for a four year-term; the same period exists for the legislative power, the Gagauz People's Assembly (Halk Toplushu). It is made up of 35 deputies, whereas every village is represented in this gathering thanks to a specific election system. The Bashkan, who is directing the activity of the public

⁵² Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...", 109.

⁵³ National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, Population by Main Nationalities, in Territorial Aspect, at <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=295&id=2234>.

⁵⁴ Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...", 110.

⁵⁵ Claus Neukirch, "National Minorities in the Republic of Moldova: Some Lessons Learned, Some Not?", 2(3) *South East Europe Review* (1999), 45-63, at 59. The author mentions certain tensions and elite behaviour as reasons for this. He repeated in an expert talk in Chisinau in July 2011 that the Bulgarians simply did not want to play a secondary role in the autonomy and so decided not to join.

⁵⁶ Christopher Hewitt, "Gagauzia", in Christopher Hewitt and Tom Cheetham (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Modern Separatist Movements* (ABC-Clio, Oxford, 2000), 108-110, at 109.

⁵⁷ Chinn and Roper, "Territorial Autonomy ...", 98. Chinn notes that: "The title itself has significance. From the outset the law recognizes both the people and their land."

⁵⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), unofficial translation, at <http://www.alegeri.md/en/legislation/>.

⁵⁹ Neukirch, "Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...", 109. Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh in her expert talk stressed the significance for this "separation if" clause in these days as well.

administrative authorities, leads also the Executive Council (Bakannik Kometeti), which is the permanent executive authority functioning as the government.⁶⁰

The main content of the Autonomy Statute⁶¹ give the impression that sufficient competences were granted to the autonomy. The special status for the Gagauz is said to be of “paramount importance”, and that it “set an example of both territorial autonomy and of minorities’ collective rights ...”.⁶² It is also often pointed out that the compromise was made because Moldova was a weak state at this time and that the Transnistrian conflict made both sides speed up negotiations.⁶³ However, as scholars frequently stress, the main flaw of the Autonomy Statute was that its very basic formulation meant a lack of details. For instance, finances were dealt with in the Statute, but it refers to other documents and thereby avoids clear rights and responsibilities. While negotiations might have been easier on such a basis, the risk was that the autonomy would be undermined in the long run.⁶⁴ However, the fact that the agreement was reached largely without international mediation showed there had been sufficient trust and political will between the two sides to reach such a compromise.⁶⁵

The rights of Gagauz Yeri were guaranteed by giving the law a high status, and were protected by legal mechanisms that made it complicated to amend. Still, changes were possible and clear constitutional support was missing at this point. While a number of issues were tackled and also some participation of minorities within the autonomy guaranteed, the incentives for further integration at this stage were limited. Counter to general recommendations, a clear system for dispute settlement was missing and the only way to deal with future conflicting issues was via the courts. At the same time, some sort of ‘constructive interdependence’ existed; by permitting symbols to the new entity and granting three languages – Moldovan, Gagauzian and Russian – official status in Gagauzia, it paid respect to some of the main triggers for the conflict and important symbolic moments for the Gagauz.⁶⁶

In the years after the Autonomy Statute was adopted, the Venice Commission of the CoE was frequently invited to assess proposed changes in Moldovan laws. With regard to the status of the Gagauz autonomy and further

⁶⁰ The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) – unofficial translation, <http://www.alegeri.md/en/legislation/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Levente Benkő, “Autonomy in Gagauzia: A Precedent for Central and Eastern Europe?”, in *ECMI Moldova*, undated, at <http://www.ecmimoldova.org/Gagauzia.115.0.html>, at 5.

⁶³ Priit, “Gagauzia and Moldova ...”, 307. This view was supported by Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh.

⁶⁴ Oleh Protsyk and Valentina Rigamonti, “Real and ‘Virtual’ Elements of Power Sharing in the Post-Soviet Space: The Case of Gagauzian Autonomy”, 6(1) *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* (2007), 7-8; Stefan Wolff, “The Distribution of Competences between Centre and Autonomy”, September 2007, at <http://www.stefanwolff.com/publications/the-distribution-of-competences-between-centre-and-autonomy>, 3-4.

⁶⁵ Gottfried Hanne (former Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova; 8 June 2011 – Vienna). He mentioned that Chisinau had even rejected any facilitation from the OSCE.

⁶⁶ Neukirch, “Autonomy and Conflict Transformation ...”, 111-112.

legal developments (the 1994 Constitution of Moldova,⁶⁷ 1998 Legal Code of Gagauzia,⁶⁸ or the 1998 Law on Political Parties and Social-Political Organizations⁶⁹), the CoE experts were largely critical of actions taken and legislative adaptations initiated by both sides.⁷⁰ Legal developments after 1994 furthermore showed that certain documents, like the Legal Code of Gagauzia,⁷¹ came too late and again contained a number of contradictions. The authorities in Comrat tried to widen their competences and did not fully pay respect to the Constitution of Moldova (the Constitution) and the 1994 Law. It took almost a decade until amendments were made to the Constitution to strengthen the autonomy's status and the entity's powers.⁷² This was a necessary and welcome step. But rather than jointly drafting the various corresponding acts, Chisinau and Comrat worked in parallel, and the opinion of international experts was heard but largely ignored. Moldovan authorities showed a lack of knowledge about the special legal status of Gagauzia. While some rights were cut off, others such as the right to propose legal initiatives were added, but it seemed that the People's Assembly in Comrat lacked the capacity to use this option successfully. So the post-1994 period was not characterized by physical confrontation, but by a number of court cases and attempts to unilaterally change the scope of the autonomy.

2.3.3. Situation during 2001-2009

The near decade of the Party of Communists' rule in Moldova also had an influence on the relations with Comrat. On the positive side, amendments in the Constitution that strengthened the autonomy were introduced in 2004.

⁶⁷ Constitution of Moldova, at <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/legislation/constitution/iii/>; Pritt Järve, "Gagauzia and Moldova: Experiences in Power-Sharing", in Marc Weller (ed.), *Settling Self-Determination Disputes: Complex Power-Sharing in Theory and Practice* (Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden, 2008), 307-344, at 318; Protsyk and Rigamonti, "Real and 'Virtual' Elements ...", 9-10.

⁶⁸ Opinion on the Legal Code of Gagauzia, Venice Commission, 7 May 1998, at <http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/1998/CDL%281998%29041-e.asp> as well as Memorandum on the Legal Code of Gagauzia, Venice Commission, 14 May 1998, <http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/1998/CDL%281998%29075-e.asp>.

⁶⁹ Igor Munteanu, *Political Parties Legislation in Moldova: Review and Recommendations for Reform* (Viitorul, Chisinau, 2010), 66; Ion Osonian and Oleh Protsyk, "Ethnic or Multi-Ethnic Parties? Party Competition and Legislative Recruitment in Moldova", in 47 *ECMI Working Paper* (March 2010) (ECMI, Flensburg, 2010), 7.

⁷⁰ Opinion on the Law on Modification and Addition in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova in particular Concerning the Status of Gagauzia, Venice Commission, 8-9 March 2002, at <http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2002/CDL-AD%282002%29020-e.asp>; Memorandum on the Legal Code of Gagauzia, Venice Commission, 14 May 1998, <http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/1998/CDL%281998%29075-e.asp>; Opinion on the Questions Raised Concerning the Conformity of the Laws of the Republic of Moldova on Local Administration and Administrative and Territorial Organisation to Current Legislation Governing Certain Minorities, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 40th Plenary Session, 15-16 October 1999, at <http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/1999/CDL-INF%281999%29014-e.asp>.

⁷¹ For a version in English, see: www.worldstatesmen.org/Gagauz_Code.pdf. In French it can be found at: <http://www.ecmimoldova.org/Gagauzia.115.0.html>.

⁷² Protsyk and Rigamonti, "Real and 'Virtual' Elements ...", 9-10.

2.3.3.1. *The Party of Communists' Rise in Chisinau*

On 25 February 2001, the Party of Communists under Vladimir Voronin won parliamentary elections in the country. The party, while in opposition in Chisinau, was known as an advocate of Gagauz interests and also for its pro-Russian statements, and had always received support from voters in the southern (and northern) region(s).⁷³ But unexpectedly, after coming into power, relations with Comrat considerably worsened.⁷⁴ The Party of Communists also started to stir internal political upheaval and 'punished' Gagauz leaders who did not comply with Chisinau's views, leading to the complete subordination of autonomy representatives to Chisinau. Among various actions, they had tried to unseat the Head of the autonomy (Bashkan) Dumitru Croitor in order to replace him with a veteran communist.⁷⁵ Society's feelings of alienation towards the capital increased and were mainly "manifested through increasing absenteeism of elections".⁷⁶

2.3.3.2. *The Party of Communists' Demise in Comrat*

In 2006 an important change in the political landscape of Gagauzia took place:

Mihail Formuzal, mayor of the second biggest Gagauz city, Ciadur Lunga, won against the incumbent Bashkan Tabunscic, who had been openly supported by the Party of Communists.⁷⁷ The winner of the vote, after a second round, was running on an anti-communist platform.⁷⁸ Formuzal, against whom criminal charges had been initiated, softened his rhetoric towards the central authorities and was kept under pressure by court cases and the withholding of financial resources from the centre.⁷⁹ The autonomy was treated like any

⁷³ E-democracy.md, "Election Results in Gagauz Yeri", 25 February 2011, at <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/elections/parliamentary/2001/results/gagauzia/>. The Communists received about 80% in Gagauzia.

⁷⁴ Aron Buzogany, "Die Republik Moldau ein Jahr nach dem Wahlsieg der Kommunisten" [The Republic of Moldova One Year after the Election Victory of the Communists], 51(1-3), *Südosteuropa* (2002), 58-60, at 43-72.

⁷⁵ The Jamestown Foundation, "Trouble Brewing in Moldova's Gagauz Autonomy", 8(52) *Monitor* (2002), at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=24006&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=216](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=24006&tx_ttnews[backPid]=216).

⁷⁶ Igor Botan, "Elections in Gagauzia", 30 November 2006, at <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/monitoring/politics/comments/20061130/>; Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 74, call the autonomy in this period "political fiction".

⁷⁷ Gottfried Hanne recalled that during Tabunscic corruption was widespread and the only aim seemed to be to place relatives in good positions in the autonomy's structure. Also, human rights reports from 2005 attribute a generally high level of corruption in the country and society, see: US Dept. of State report on Moldova 2005, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 8 March 2006, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61664.htm>.

⁷⁸ Dumitru Lazur, "In Gagauzia, the Communists Experienced their First Defeat", 8 December 2006, at <http://www.api.md/articles/2646/en.html>; the Freedom House report of 2006 mentions the repression exerted on the opposition by local authorities and the Communist party in power, prior to the elections: Freedom House, "County Report Moldova", 2006, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=396&year=2006>.

⁷⁹ Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 80; Oleh Protsyk, "Gagauz Autonomy in Moldova: The Real and the Virtual in Post-Soviet State Design", in Marc Weller (ed.), *Asymmetric Autonomy as a Tool of Ethnic Conflict Settlement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010), 231-251, at 246-247; CISR - Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, "Gagauzia in Search for Financial Autonomy", 2006, at <http://www.cisr.md.org/reports/Notes%202006/note2.html>; Michael D. Kirby, US embassy in Chisinau cable,

other district of the country⁸⁰ and, as a result of informal mechanisms of control, confrontations were limited and a certain “accommodationist approach”⁸¹ on the part of Comrat could be seen. Worsening relations between Moldova and the Russian Federation in this period also had an effect on Gagauzia: the population of the entity was mainly living on agricultural products, and so the economic consequences of import constraints to the Russian Federation were strongly felt there.⁸²

The main focus of President Voronin during this period was Transnistria, and Moldova’s approach towards the separatist entity had an influence on the dynamics between Comrat and Chisinau.⁸³ Positions and statements concerning a solution to Transnistria’s status varied due to political events, but when ties between Comrat and Chisinau deteriorated, as in 2000, the result was a renewal of the autonomy’s contacts with Transnistria.⁸⁴ Scholars called the link between the two regions an ‘alliance of convenience’, formed on the language issue and the fear of unification with Romania,⁸⁵ whereas a possible solution to Transnistria will in any event also imply political developments for the south of Moldova. The authorities in Gagauzia have not stopped proposing to convert the Republic of Moldova into a federal state consisting of three entities - Moldova, Gagauzia and Transnistria.⁸⁶ As the Minorities at Risk think tank concluded in 2006, if a resolution with Transnistria “includes greater autonomous powers for that region, which seems likely, some members of the Gagauz elite could call for greater political power in the Gagauz region as well, potentially aggravating political tension”.⁸⁷

2.4. Developments after 2009

During the April 2009 parliamentary elections, more than 60 per cent of the votes in Gagauzia were cast in favour of the Party of Communists. In the repeated election in July of the same year, 77 per cent voted for the communists.⁸⁸ Relations with the new government were strained by a number

⁸⁰ “Moldova: Economic Squeeze Non-Communist Leaders”, 08CHISINAU306, 2008, at <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=146526>.

Avram, *Territorial Autonomy of the Gagauz ...*, 18.

⁸¹ Protsyk and Rigamonti, “Real and ‘Virtual’ Elements ...”, 13.

⁸² Emmet Tuohy and Melinda Haring, “Moldova: The Example of Gagauz-Yeri as an ‘Unfrozen Conflict’ Region”, 5 April 2007, at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075722.html>.

⁸³ Vladimir Socor, “Voronin-Medvedev Accord Demolishes Moldova’s Negotiating Position on Transnistria”, 6(54) *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (2009), at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=34736](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34736).

⁸⁴ Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 80.

⁸⁵ Maximilian Spinner, *Civil War and Ethnic Conflict in Post-Soviet Moldova: The Cases of Gagauzia and Transnistria Compared* (CEU – GRIN, Budapest, 2003).

⁸⁶ European Partnership for Democracy, “Gagauzia Has its own Ideas Concerning Constitutional Reform in Moldova”, in *Report on the Current Situation in Moldova*, translation from Infotag, Moldova Bulletin (2010); Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, “Ethnic Mobilization and Reactive Nationalism: The Case of Moldova”, 23(2), *Nationalities Papers* (1995), 291 – 325

⁸⁷ Minorities at Risk, “Assessment for Gagauz in Moldova”, 31 December 2006, at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupid=35901>.

⁸⁸ Ilja Burdov, “Kandidat”, 23 October 2010, at <http://www.puls.md/ru/content/кандидат>.

of issues in 2010,⁸⁹ whereas this year was mainly marked by elections: two rounds of voting for Bashkan had to take place to finally confirm Mihail Formuzal as winner. This time during the polls, the central authorities did not try to directly influence the vote and observed the local political elite in their post-election dispute.⁹⁰ The Executive Committee was finally approved on 9 March 2011, while the previous months had seen demonstrations by the opposition and internal political struggles.⁹¹ Since then the autonomy has continued to be taken hostage by disputes between the Bashkan/Executive Committee and the People's Assembly: the local budget could only be approved late in March 2012, following the attempt to dissolve the local parliament and the initiation of the Bashkan's resignation procedure.⁹²

The conflict between the legislative and executive authorities, and the three main political groupings in Gagauzia, with their (unofficial) affiliations in Chisinau, culminated in the organization of the local elections, due after the People's Assembly's term expired in April 2012. The previously planned election date of 29 July 2012, as well as the composition of the Election Commission, led to disputes.⁹³ The polls finally took place on 9 September 2012, after the Election Commission had called them "on the brink of failure" due to underfunding.⁹⁴ A second voting date was necessary two weeks later. The results were: 25 mandates for independent candidates, 7 mandates for representatives of the Party of Communists, 2 mandates for candidates of the Liberal Democratic Party and one for the Party of Socialists.⁹⁵

The local polls in Gagauzia proceeded relatively unnoticed by the rest of the country, such as the autonomy has not received sufficient attention in central politics since the change in power in Chisinau. Most experts attribute this to the fact that the priority in the centre is now to tackle issues such as

⁸⁹ Moldova.org, "Russian Lawmakers to Discuss New Day Declared in Moldova", 1 July 2010, at <http://politicom.moldova.org/news/russian-lawmakers-to-discuss-new-day-declared-in-moldova-210543-eng.html>; Regnum, "Единая Гагаузия: И.о. президента Молдавии грубо оскорбил всех гагаузов" [United Gagauzia: Interim President of Moldova Grossly Insulted the Gagauz], 3 September 2010, at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1321907.html>.

⁹⁰ Igor Botan, "Results of Elections in Gagauzia and the Post-Electoral Situation", 20 January 2011, at <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/monitoring/politics/comments/results-elections-gagauzia-2010/>.

⁹¹ AZI, "Gagauzia Government's Structure and Personal Composition Approved", 10 March 2011, at <http://www.azi.md/en/story/17025>.

⁹² Infotag, "Gagauzia Legislature and Executive Power Achieve Compromise on Budget 2012", 13 February 2012, at <http://www.infotag.md/news-en/593426/>; a detailed account on the budget discussion can be found at Kommersant.md, "Отставки пошли на повышение" [Resignations on the Rise], 10 February 2012, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/6612>.

⁹³ Kommersant.md, "Выборочное законодательство" [Electoral Legislation], 23 May 2012, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/8198>; Infotag, "Election Situation in Gagauzia Assuming Stalemate Character - Vasily Neikovchen", 30 May 2012, at <http://www.infotag.md/news-en/595182/>. On 29 May 2012, the head of Moldova's Central Election Commission questioned the process as well. See: Regnum.ru, "ЦИК Молдавии: Проведение выборов в парламент Гагаузии под вопросом" [CEC Moldova: The Conduct of Elections in the Parliament of Gagauzia are under Question], 29 May 2012, at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1536243.html#ixzz1wSZRsOYt>.

⁹⁴ Infotag.md, "Polls in Gagauzia on the Brink of Failure - Election Commission", 10 August 2012, at <http://www.infotag.md/news-en/596482/>.

⁹⁵ Gagauzia.md, "Official Election Results for the People's Assembly 2012", 24 September 2012, at <http://www.gagauzia.md/newsview.php?l=ru&idc=390&id=3751>; as well as Adept/E-Democracy, "Elections to the People's Assembly of Gagauzia of September 9 and 23, 2012", at <http://www.e-democracy.md/ru/elections/gagauzia/2012/results>.

European integration and the economic crisis. Interlocutors in Comrat during the expert interviews in July 2011 referred to the continuing internal divisions in Chisinau as reasons for the little contact/interest from central authorities and stressed that the frequent holding of elections on a state level led to more passiveness of the electorate in the south.

3. Drawing Lessons from Gagauzia - Assessing the Autonomy in 2012

3.1. Evaluation of the State of the Autonomy in 2012

3.1.1. General Findings

All experts gave a positive assessment of the 1994 Law and that a peaceful solution could be found to the conflict. Persons that had questioned the content of the Autonomy Statute already during the negotiations back then still maintained their position.⁹⁶

Some experts believed that the 1994 Law as a solution to accommodate the Gagauz demands did not yield satisfactory results, citing the non-development of the Gagauz language as an indicator. The autonomy to some extent might even be seen as a "self-isolation instrument."⁹⁷ To understand the situation of Gagauzia one should see the wider perspective: Moldovan society had not agreed on its fundamental issues, the center did not show willingness for consolidation, and there was no agreement on certain historical facts; there was no substantial discussion of what united people in the country and a dialogue between cities was non-existent.⁹⁸ To some extent this view was voiced in the south as well: A number of interlocutors negatively mentioned that Romanian history was now taught in schools, and that it looked like only the Gagauz were fighting for maintaining the 'Moldovan identity' and independence.⁹⁹ As one of the leaders of the Gagauz movement, Stepan Topal, explained, it was the ongoing unsatisfactory situation that in 2011 led to the foundation of the Council of Elders. He said there was no danger of war, but it was now time to convince

⁹⁶ Victor Popa (MP of the Liberal Party, Chair of the Legal, Appointments and Immunities Committee; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau) called Gagauzia "a secret republic". He also brought up the question of who they were and if it was possible for them to be called a nation, with respect to a number of historical issues. He said cultural autonomy would have been more appropriate, as CoE experts had recommended, and the whole law and the terms used were partly "non-sense" and in contradiction to international standards. Today, nobody would monitor the laws that are adopted in Gagauzia.

⁹⁷ Oazu Nantoi (Director of Programs of the Institute for Public Policy, former presidential advisor; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Telpiz Nikolai (Deputy head of the New Gagauzia public movement; 21 July 2011 - Comrat), Gagauz Fiodor (Chairman of the public organisation "United Gagauzia"; 22 July 2011 - Comrat), Topal Stepan Mihailovitsh (Advisor to the Bashkan; elected president of the self-proclaimed Gagauz SSR; 22 July 2011 - Comrat)

people and finally solve the Gagauz question; the autonomy was stuck in a one-way street, so dialogue was needed.¹⁰⁰ Interlocutors with a political background in Comrat assessed that the autonomy was being ignored and was being treated as a district.

In general, despite being in opposition to each other, all representatives of the United Gagauzia as well as the New Gagauzia movements shared nearly the same concerns and criticism. Bashkan Formuzal himself called the solution of the political elite in the 1990s “very wise”, and said that the law was very good, but up until 2012 it did not look as if anybody wanted to implement it. Instead of modernizing the legal framework, and giving Gagauzia more responsibilities, parts of the 1994 Law were adapted and the competences of the autonomy decreased. In recent years, the leadership of Moldova has managed to remove all ethnic Gagauz from leading positions in the country, meaning that Gagauzia was not able to fully participate in questions concerning Moldova.¹⁰¹ He claimed that relations with Chisinau were not characterized by respect and there was a strong centralization.¹⁰² As Bashkan Formuzal was responsible for the functioning of the autonomy, but had no tools to use. He also warned that at some point the “forgotten about nation” might ask: “If we are not necessary for you, maybe you are also not for us.”¹⁰³ The more the Autonomy Statute was ignored, the more self-rule the Gagauz would demand and radicalism in society could grow.¹⁰⁴ Political leaders in Comrat were prepared to cooperate with all parties that wanted to work for the autonomy, but did not see a real interest from their counterparts. For instance, a state development programme for the south of the country still did not exist.¹⁰⁵ “Sixteen and a half years of existence of the autonomy mean sixteen and a half years of missed opportunities by Moldova.”¹⁰⁶

Similarly, other experts in Comrat noted the following concerns: Moldova would take out loans and receive international aid money, but these sums would not be distributed to Gagauzia. The conflicts in the centre were transferred to the autonomy as the same parties were also active in Gagauz Yeri. The autonomy was being ignored and expectations and promises from 1994 not fulfilled.¹⁰⁷

Experts in Chisinau and Vienna confirmed that central authorities were not paying much attention to the south; opinions concerning the reasons ranged from the political situation and economic possibilities preventing them from

¹⁰⁰ Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal, who stressed that there was no separatism in Gagauzia. During the talks in Comrat, everyone was very cautious in using this term and stressed the patriotism for Moldova.

¹⁰¹ Mihail Macar Formuzal lamented that no Gagauz was a minister, director of a department, consul, etc.

¹⁰² This was also strongly pointed out by Ana Harlamenko (Speaker of the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

¹⁰³ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

¹⁰⁴ This view of Ana Harlamenko was confirmed by Igor Botan (executive director of ADEPT - Association for Participatory Democracy; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

¹⁰⁷ Nikolai Telpiz; Fiodor Gagauz; Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal.

doing so¹⁰⁸ to “consciously ignoring” that the Autonomy Statute existed.¹⁰⁹ The approach towards the south was similar to the one towards other regions;¹¹⁰ the people in power seemed to have “no wish, no money, or no vision”.¹¹¹ The Alliance for European Integration (AEI) coalition in Chisinau involved persons that had been against the autonomy in the 1990s; in addition, the AEI had different issues to deal with than Gagauzia.¹¹² With respect to the current financial and political crisis, it was recommended neither to start questioning the autonomy nor to try to fundamentally change things because that could lead to another crisis.¹¹³

Members of Parliament (MPs) of Gagauz origin were somewhat critical of the shortcomings in Comrat: MP Alexandru Stoianoglu said his party was prepared to implement more projects in Gagauzia, but better cooperation from the side of local politicians was necessary.¹¹⁴ MP Irina Vlah confirmed that the autonomy was working, but looking back at its original idea - the protection of the Gagauz people, their culture, their economic development, the Gagauz language - there had not been much progress. Laws still were not consistent with each other, which led to problems.¹¹⁵

3.1.2. Internal Dynamics as Influencing Factors

3.1.2.1. Divisions in Gagauzia and Behaviour of the Elite

As Igor Botan analysed at the beginning of 2011, the conflicts between Chisinau and Comrat during the communist period left their mark until recently, and public scandals and court cases had characterized the relationship between the People’s Assembly and the Bashkan until 2012.¹¹⁶ As was explained by experts in a number of talks, the main factions in Gagauzia, besides the Communists, were the United Gagauzia movement of the Bashkan, and Comrat mayor Dudoglo’s New Gagauzia movement, which were constantly infighting after the Bashkan elections.¹¹⁷ In general, there were a

¹⁰⁸ Igor Botan.

¹⁰⁹ Gottfried Hanne mentioned that despite promises to do so, not one single law had been changed with respect to the 1994 Law. He felt that in Chisinau certain voices believed that the Gagauz have their autonomy now, so they should not complain anymore.

¹¹⁰ Gottfried Hanne; Claus Neukirch (outgoing Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova; 26 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹¹¹ Liubomir Chiriac (executive director of the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) ‘Viitorul’; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹¹² Gottfried Hanne.

¹¹³ Liubomir Chiriac.

¹¹⁴ Alexandru Stoianoglu (MP of the Democratic Party, Chair of the Commission on national security, defence and public order, former deputy prosecutor of Moldova; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹¹⁵ Irina Vlah (MP of the Communist Party; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau), however, stressed that the region is now more open (minded), and she accredited the current leadership for opening up to European structures.

¹¹⁶ Botan, “Results of Elections in Gagauzia ...”.

¹¹⁷ As Claus Neukirch confirmed, the current picture does not show many conflicts with Chisinau, but within the autonomy.

number of indicators of family politics and links between the elite - even if active in different political organizations.¹¹⁸

The struggle between the Bashkan and the speaker of the People's Assembly was an obstacle to development.¹¹⁹ MP Stoianoglu gave the example that his parliamentary commission had discussed a law proposal from the People's Assembly and gave their supportive response, but under the precondition - as it was a complex project - that the local government would also endorse it, which had not happened.¹²⁰ MP Petru Vlah said that the fact that within Gagauzia the authorities would not cooperate with each other was, and will be, used by Chisinau.¹²¹ Stepan Topal said that Chisinau would use the "divide and rule" principle and the current disunity in the elite was caused by party politics.¹²²

When both central and regional authorities were from the same part of the political spectrum, that is, until 1998 and after 2001 until 2009, elites tried to reach solutions via direct deals with the parties in power in Chisinau.¹²³ It was also observed that the "autonomy was understood as a protection against interference from the outside".¹²⁴ In general, experts perceived a very emotional approach in Comrat to matters concerning the autonomy, for instance when attempts were made to initiate electoral reform in Gagauzia.¹²⁵ The organization of local elections falls within the autonomy's competences, and when in 1997 Moldova introduced a new law, the Gagauz copied most of it, but since then they have not followed the changes in the state law.¹²⁶

In a situation where one side wanted to undermine the Autonomy Statute, and the other side worked as if it was de facto independent, a proper dialogue could not be conducted.¹²⁷

3.1.2.2. Local Capacities

Over the years the Gagauz faced problems in developing their own local human capital, and there were simply not enough competent persons to implement the legal and economic plans. Specialists who knew "how to use

¹¹⁸ Liubomir Chiriac.

¹¹⁹ Irina Vlah.

¹²⁰ Alexandru Stoianoglu.

¹²¹ Petru Vlah (MP of the Liberal Democratic Party, Parliamentary Commission for human rights and inter-ethnic relations; 25 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹²² Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal. He added that once the Gagauz were not allowed to have their own parties, then there should not be any party on their territory.

¹²³ Gottfried Hanne. He added that the people in power in Comrat did not have much experience and so were not capable of fully using their theoretical competencies of the autonomy, so sought deals via this channel.

¹²⁴ Gottfried Hanne. This view was supported by Claus Neukirch.

¹²⁵ Claus Neukirch. He mentioned as an example that last year the OSCE tried a project with Gagauzia, but did not start it since they were told to not tackle certain issues, especially during election times.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* The reasoning of the People's Assembly was unclear to him. In this respect, Stepan Topal mentioned that Gagauzia should not change laws by simply following the example of Moldova.

¹²⁷ Claus Neukirch. He mentioned that, originally, voices in Chisinau claimed the Moldova state law had priority, which was not correct since the autonomy has competences in the field of electoral laws.

the autonomy” were leaving the region¹²⁸ because of the economic situation, which was true for the whole country, leading to instabilities with cadre policies as well.¹²⁹ Approximately 25,000 of 160,000 inhabitants permanently migrated for work, with men leaving mainly for Russia and women for Turkey.¹³⁰

One aspect that was pointed out by a few experts was the fact that the People’s Assembly in Comrat did not function on a professional basis, which also meant that deputies would not often meet and at times there were poorly attended sessions.¹³¹ The 35 deputies worked on a volunteer basis and only members of the presidium were paid.¹³²

3.1.2.3. Transnistria

Bashkan Formuzal explained the current position of the autonomy as follows: if the Transnistria problem was solved the status of Gagauzia could not be lower than that of the other entity. If a federation was set up, the autonomy wanted to have a federative status as well. In late 2012, as in previous years, the de-facto government in Tiraspol (Transnistria) sees Gagauzia as an anti-model.¹³³ While Transnistria was not a frequent topic during talks in Comrat, some participants voiced the hope that once this question was solved, it might have a positive effect on the south too.¹³⁴

Other experts expressed the opinion that in Chisinau’s view, Transnistria needed a wider autonomy arrangement than Gagauzia, but that a federation was not a very popular idea; if some sort of asymmetric model was nevertheless found, the Gagauz would want as much as the Transnistrians – indicators of this have always been visible. So somehow the Gagauz had to be involved and, even more importantly, willingness had to be shown in order to solve the obstacles to the implementation of the 1994 Law, in parallel to the negotiation process with Transnistria.¹³⁵ “Based on what is happening in Gagauzia, they [Moldovans] have failed their exam here”¹³⁶. The elites in Chisinau were aware that Gagauzia was not like Transnistria, but still a permanent dialogue was needed so as not to further antagonize the citizens in the south.¹³⁷ At the same time, Comrat’s display of solidarity and links with Tiraspol were not well perceived in Chisinau.¹³⁸ The ‘Gagauz factor’ thereby

¹²⁸ Gottfried Hanne.

¹²⁹ Liubomir Chiriac. Furthermore, Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal pointed out it was the young who could change something in the autonomy, but the eco-social situation made them passive or simply indifferent.

¹³⁰ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

¹³¹ Stepan Mihailovitsh Topal, which he mentioned with a critical eye towards the deputies.

¹³² Ana Harlamenko.

¹³³ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

¹³⁴ Fiodor Gagauz.

¹³⁵ Gottfried Hanne. He added that otherwise the Gagauz will “more strongly demand than what is on paper”.

¹³⁶ Anonymous background talk; June 2011 - Vienna. The interlocutor is involved in the ‘5+2’ talks.

¹³⁷ Igor Botan.

¹³⁸ Oazu Nantoi.

played some role in the state-building question of the country when it came to the question of Transnistria.¹³⁹

The 2012-elected leadership in Tiraspol has already shown interest in enlarging the current cooperation format with Gagauzia;¹⁴⁰ while the '5+2' talks - the official international settlement negotiation process involving Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE, plus the US and the EU as external observers - were revived in September 2011,¹⁴¹ the position of the parties largely remained unchanged and the topic of federalization was brought up in the media again.¹⁴²

3.1.3. External Actors as Influencing Actors

3.1.3.1. The Russian Federation

Outside Gagauzia, the Russian Federation was accredited with having an interest in keeping the status quo and stopping the modernization in the country. Moldova should be kept unstable and not move forward, as worries about a potential new EU border coming closer were high. It was even hinted that Gagauzia was a product of Russian interests.¹⁴³ The MP of the Liberal Party explained that the territorial location and structure of Gagauzia could not be compared to compact Transnistria, which remained the main block used by Russia to halt any NATO enlargement further east.¹⁴⁴

While most experts assumed that the links of Gagauzia with the Russian Federation were not as developed as those between Tiraspol and Moscow, they still referred to those connections as to more influential than those with Turkey. Besides, it was pointed out that there were historically developed, positive relations with the Russian Federation, and the population of the autonomy also mainly followed Russian mass media. This contributed to the Gagauz' tendency to take pro-Russian positions.¹⁴⁵

As a young non-governmental organization (NGO) activist in Comrat put it: "A good Gagauz is considered to be pro-Russian and Orthodox."¹⁴⁶ One main

¹³⁹ Claus Neukirch.

¹⁴⁰ As *AllMoldova* reported on 29 March 2012, the new de facto president of Transnistria, Yevgeny Shevchuk, suggested "accelerating the realization of previous accords on cooperation and to broaden and enrich the format of bilateral interaction" when speaking to a delegation from Gagauzia. See: *AllMoldova*, "Gagauzia Develops Cooperation with Transnistria", 29 March 2012, at <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249052898.html>.

¹⁴¹ OSCE press release, "OSCE Chairperson-in-Office welcomes resumption of official '5+2' negotiations on Transdniestrian settlement", 22 September 2011, at <http://www.osce.org/cio/82758>. For more background information on the negotiations and conflict resolution efforts: <http://www.osce.org/moldova/43602>.

¹⁴² Infotag, "Moldovan Leader Calls for Broad Autonomy for Rebel Region", 24 July 2012, at <http://www.bne.eu/blob.php?id=323875&m=9b30b1a21cf39c9ca6ef6a903957da0c>; as well as Olvia-press, "Moldovan Separatist Leader Denies Federation Talks, Praises Russian Peacekeepers", BBC Monitoring (2012), at <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-297811158/moldovan-separatist-leader-denies.html>.

¹⁴³ Background talks with diplomats; 27 June 2011 - Vienna.

¹⁴⁴ Victor Popa.

¹⁴⁵ Irina Vlah.

¹⁴⁶ Mihail Sirkeli (Pilgrim-Demo NGO; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

dilemma of Gagauz politics therefore appears to be that, in order to win the majority of votes in the ATU, politicians had to support topics linked to Russia (such as language and foreign policy) and to make sure the radical forces in the autonomy would not win these rhetorical fights.¹⁴⁷ Other experts confirmed this view and that calls before elections to make Russian a state language and other populist messages in this direction were clearly being made for internal purposes.¹⁴⁸

During the visit to Comrat of a member of a Moscow think tank, who pointed out that Gagauzia represented an important factor in Russian-Moldovan relations, the Bashkan also stressed the significant material support that had been provided to the autonomy by the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁹ When talking about the relations between Comrat and Moscow, the scope for conflict in external relations becomes obvious: while Gagauzia is often referred to as an important factor in Russian-Moldovan relations,¹⁵⁰ problems occurred when the sovereignty of Moldova seemed undermined.¹⁵¹

3.1.3.2. Turkey (and the Turkic World)

Turkey's role was, in general, assessed positively because all its economic and educational support was not focused on "stirring political hatred".¹⁵² Some voices claimed that Turkish diplomats were tired of going to Comrat and seeing that nothing had changed, and that some sort of "psychological inertia" could be observed.¹⁵³ The Turkish embassy gave a lot of support for infrastructure and other development projects, while at the same time took a critical position, especially concerning the Gagauz people's slow progress learning their native language.¹⁵⁴ Scholarships and support of infrastructure projects based on agreements with Moldova would often only be given to Gagauzia.¹⁵⁵ One expert called the "pan-Turkism games", which aimed to increase ties with Azerbaijan and Tatarstan, a normal phenomenon and part of protection seeking of the Gagauz from abroad.¹⁵⁶

While Moldova's newly elected President Nicolae Timofti rarely made statements about Gagauzia, during his visit to Turkey in June 2012 he called

¹⁴⁷ This view by Mihail Sirkeli was supported in Avram, *Territorial Autonomy of the Gagauz ...*, 18.

¹⁴⁸ Liubomir Chiriac.

¹⁴⁹ Regnum, "Российский эксперт: Гагаузия - важный фактор в российско-молдавских отношениях" [Russian Expert: Gagauzia - an Important Factor in Russian-Moldovan Relations], 5 October 2010, at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1332652.html>.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Regnum, "Gagauzia's Parliament Recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia", 19 September 2008, at <http://www.regnum.ru/english/1057573.html>; BBC Monitoring, "Moldova Criticizes Gagauzia for Recognizing Georgia's Rebel Regions", 23 September 2008, at <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-187556869/moldova-criticizes-gagauzia-recognizing.html>.

¹⁵² This is how one expert phrased it during an anonymous background talk in Vienna, June 2011.

¹⁵³ Background talks with diplomats; 27 June 2011 - Vienna.

¹⁵⁴ Liubomir Chiriac.

¹⁵⁵ Victor Mocanu (expert in central and local government of the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) 'Viitorul'; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

¹⁵⁶ Igor Botan. During the visit to Comrat, the author heard about an Azerbaijani plan to finance an Olympic complex in the autonomy.

for more loyalty towards the Republic of Moldova from the political and cultural elite of the autonomy.¹⁵⁷

3.1.3.3. Romania

Some commentators considered the ongoing 'Romania-phobia' in Gagauzia to be exaggerated because the Romanian political class' agenda did not include unification.¹⁵⁸ The representative of the Liberal Party explained that unification would naturally take place once Moldova was integrated in the EU. Gagauzia would not be an obstacle on the path to integration, unlike Transnistria, and might even be in favour.¹⁵⁹

After the change in power and the post-election situation had calmed down in Moldova, relations with Romania returned to normal. According to (former) Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi, the EU would no longer suspect Bucharest of promoting a "hidden agenda" in relation to Moldova.¹⁶⁰ A diplomat from an EU institution in Chisinau explained, however, that Brussels was closely following Romania's proactive policies as those sometimes did not tackle the country's real problems.¹⁶¹

3.1.3.4. EU

The EU was considered as a 'magnetic field' with the potential to consolidate the whole country.¹⁶² MP Stoianoglu claimed that the opposition would often play on anti-Romanian sentiments and link EU integration with being under the control of the neighbouring country. But things were slowly changing and the younger generation was especially open to, and understanding of, European values. The declining support for the Communist party in Gagauzia was also an indicator of this.¹⁶³ Civil society representatives in Comrat stated that the population's trust in the EU was very high.¹⁶⁴

In Vienna, diplomats viewed the fact that Gagauzia showed an interest in transborder cooperation with Romania as an indicator for a change of the Cold War mentality.¹⁶⁵ Bashkan Formuzal considered the EU perspective, in general, to be the "most attractive and a possible solution to all conflicts".¹⁶⁶ The ATU at that point had no special cooperation programme with the EU, but could rely on good contacts with the diplomatic corps of some EU

¹⁵⁷ Infotag, "Communists Demand that President Timofti must Explain his Statements about Gagauz People", 28 June 2012, at <http://www.infotag.md/news-en/595676/>.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Ivan Grec, as well as interlocutors in Comrat, however, referred to official statements that would give a different impression.

¹⁵⁹ Victor Popa. One third of Moldovans would already be Romanian citizens.

¹⁶⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Romanian FM Says Relations with Moldova Much Improved", 11 June 2011, at http://www.rferl.org/content/romania_moldova_relations/24231939.html.

¹⁶¹ Background talk with an EU diplomat; July 2011 - Chisinau.

¹⁶² Oazu Nantoi.

¹⁶³ Alexandru Stoianoglu.

¹⁶⁴ Vitali Burlaca (Stability NGO; 22 July 2011 - Comrat); Mihail Sirkeli.

¹⁶⁵ Background talks with diplomats; 27 June 2011 - Vienna. The visit of the Bashkan to the Romanian city of Galati was the first of its kind in the autonomy's existence.

¹⁶⁶ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

countries.¹⁶⁷ Moldovan external policy was changing every year, and the Bashkan voiced disappointment that Gagauzia's attempt to join the Lower Danube region had, so far, been blocked by Moldova. Appropriate documents were prepared and visits paid to Galati in Romania in an attempt to become part of this 'Euroregion', but Chisinau halted Gagauzia's participation in related projects - and thereby ended the possibility of receiving investments.¹⁶⁸

Despite Moldova's enthusiasm for links with the EU,¹⁶⁹ in 2012 the integration process was reaching a point where complicated internal reforms had to take place. Improvements in the rule of law and good governance would have a positive impact on the autonomy to function better, and there would be more stability, which was as important for the socio-economic development of Gagauzia. In the end, new EU perspectives were good for Gagauzia.¹⁷⁰ On 15 May 2012, Europe Day was celebrated for the first time in Comrat.¹⁷¹

3.1.4. Integration with Moldova

The autonomy had economic ties with other regions and a number of branches of enterprises from Chisinau, for instance, in Comrat.¹⁷² In general, however, all experts came to the conclusion that after the 1994 Law came into force, there was no sign of an increased integration of Gagauz society and this objective so far has not been achieved. Since the autonomy depended on financial support from the centre, the support could be used as leverage would the autonomy not share national interests, for example, in relation to the state language.¹⁷³

3.1.4.1. Language

The Gagauz consider themselves part of the larger Russian-language community, which is 25 per cent of the country's population, and repeatedly invoke the linguistic question. Once again during the summer of 2011, the Bashkan called for official documents sent to Comrat to be in Russian, and not Romanian, otherwise they would be refused.¹⁷⁴ Later that year Comrat confirmed that it was then receiving official documents in two languages, and the ones in Romanian only were returned.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* He mentioned the embassies of Poland, Hungary, Germany and the Czech Republic in this respect.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* One of his explanations was corruption in Chisinau.

¹⁶⁹ As confirmed by all diplomats that gave background talks.

¹⁷⁰ Claus Neukirch.

¹⁷¹ Miras.md, "Europe Day in Comrat, Organized by 'Pro-Europe' Centre", 15 May 2012, at <http://miras.md/new/e/index.php?newsid=47>.

¹⁷² Irina Vlah.

¹⁷³ Victor Mocanu.

¹⁷⁴ Igor Botan; Liubomir Chiriac. The latter said that he believed such statements were the product of the inner political situation in Gagauzia. Stepan Topal criticized that despite the three languages being official in the autonomy, all official documents would be sent in Moldovan.

¹⁷⁵ Kommersant.md, "Документы из Кишинева в Гагаузию стали поступать на двух языках" [Documents from Chisinau Started to Reach Gagauzia in Two Languages], 5 September 2011, at

In April 2012 the Bashkan stated that letters from Chisinau, not translated into Russian, would be answered in the Gagauz language. In addition, he said that there were insufficient qualified translators to cope with the demand.¹⁷⁶ Earlier attempts to obtain more financial support for Moldovan language training were turned down by Chisinau, stating that language training was the autonomy's responsibility.¹⁷⁷ Only 57 Moldovan teachers in Gagauzia had any experience,¹⁷⁸ and due to the lack of finances the autonomy could not even open one Gagauz school.¹⁷⁹

Experts also repeated the fact that this language-training problem had to be solved, with some saying that the issue was mainly linked to financial resources. There were clear signs that people in the ATU, especially in the administration, wanted to learn the state language, and they were even prepared to pay to do so. The authorities in Chisinau, who claimed a lack of funds because of the economic crisis, were weak on this point, but it was this question to bring the two sides closer again.¹⁸⁰ Prof. Tshimpoesh called on the government to take responsibility for the training issue and to do something about it. Modern methods are needed in language training. Also, she considered the protection of the Gagauz culture to be the responsibility of the autonomy's authorities, who were, in fact, not fulfilling this role.¹⁸¹ An example is the Gagauz National Theatre (named after M. Cakir), which performs successfully abroad but receives little support in Gagauzia.¹⁸² Some experts were more critical of the Gagauz, asking why they did not show more interest in improving the knowledge of their native language.¹⁸³

Many visitors to Gagauzia are struck by the fact that Russian is the main language and that sometimes the Gagauz are not fluent in their native tongue. There is no school that teaches solely in Gagauz, and efforts to set up a trial are made up and then, while parents are said to believe that Russian and Moldovan are sufficient to know for their children. At the time of writing in 2012, one prototype school and kindergarten

<http://www.kommersant.md/node/4555>. This was laid down in a decree of the Executive Committee, referring to the Autonomy Statute.

¹⁷⁶ *Kommersant.md*, "Гагаузия будет отвечать Кишиневу на гагаузском" [Gagauzia Will Answer Chisinau in Gagauz], 26 April 2012, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/7789>.

¹⁷⁷ As he said: "They tell me - this is your problem, find them. I identify them - they agree but ask for housing. I ask Chisinau for money - 'This your problem.' So is this my or a state problem?!"

¹⁷⁸ Gagauzlar, "Формузал: Нет вины детей, в том что они плохо знают государственный язык" [Formuzal: It Is Not the Fault of the Kids that they Don't Know the State Language], 24 July 2011, at <http://www.gagauzlar.md/libview.php?l=ru&idc=295&id=2588&parent=0>.

¹⁷⁹ Ana Harlamenko. She also said that Gagauzia would not open Moldovan schools either if Gagauz ones were not possible.

¹⁸⁰ Liubomir Chiriac. He referred to the successful project www.antem.org. He mentioned that with up to 100,000 USD about 300 persons could be trained properly.

¹⁸¹ Ljubov Tshimpoesh.

¹⁸² *New Time* (printed newspaper), "Спектакль театр имени Чакира обсудит Шекспировская комиссия" [The Shakespeare Commission is Discussing a Play by the Theatre Named after Cakir], No. 17, 13 May 2011; scanned version provided by Kyle Marquardt. Mihail Konstantinov (Director of the Gagauz National Theatre named after M. Cakir; 23 July 2011 - Cadir-Lunga). He also talked about the bad conditions of the theatre building and the low salaries of the actors, among others.

¹⁸³ Victor Popa.

(with two groups) are functioning in Comrat.¹⁸⁴ Also, there is limited teaching in Gagauz at the University of Comrat, where teaching in Russian dominates.¹⁸⁵

MP Stoianoglu mentioned that a programme to address the language problem so far could not be implemented because of the political instability. Nobody was forced to learn Moldovan, but in order to have a career and work for the state, knowing Moldovan was a necessity, as it was for those in the field of higher education. Unfortunately, a clear state policy does not yet exist.¹⁸⁶

In a recent 2012 report on linguistic rights of the Gagauz in Moldova (“Implementation of Linguistic Rights of the Gagauz of Moldova: Integration of the Gagauz Community into the Society of Moldova” by the Pilgrim-Demo Youth Centre), the authors stated that Gagauzia was a Russian-language autonomy and that there were serious contradictions between the Law of the Republic of Moldova on Languages and the Law of Gagauz Yeri on Languages. Furthermore, the Gagauz language was not a language of the passport system in Moldova, thus violating the right to privacy of the Gagauz.¹⁸⁷ In conclusion, the authors stated that the original purpose of the creation of Gagauzia, namely to preserve and develop the Gagauz language and culture, as well as to implement the linguistic and cultural rights of the Gagauz in Moldova, had not been achieved.¹⁸⁸

3.1.4.2. Education

Education is closely linked to the question of language and is an important factor of integration into the country. During the author’s field-research visit to Moldova in 2011, a representative case of the connected problems of language and education, and the integration of the Gagauz, was frequently mentioned and in the daily headlines. In July a number students from Gagauzia failed their final exams in the Romanian language and literature. There were furious reactions in Comrat, with authorities blaming the government for failing to deliver on a promise to increase funding and improve the study of the state language in Gagauzia.¹⁸⁹ The Gagauz

¹⁸⁴ Irina Vlah. This would be the wish of the parents, since the study of up to four languages was a great hardship for children.

¹⁸⁵ Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 88. See the university’s website: Komrat Devlet Universiteti, at <http://www.kdu.md/> - most of its content is in Russian. Stepan Topal had pointed out that the rector of the university for the past years had been appointed by Chisinau, and the local authorities were not included in this selection process. For the first year, the university had run solely on local donations.

¹⁸⁶ Alexandru Stoianoglu. He listed language as the main factor for the further integration of the autonomy and for people to feel themselves as fully fledged citizens.

¹⁸⁷ Pilgrim-Demo Youth Centre, Policy Brief “Implementation of Linguistic Rights of the Gagauz of Moldova: Integration of the Gagauz Community into the Society of Moldova”, (Pilgrim-Demo Youth Centre, Comrat, 2012). They stress that, however, no claims were made by the Gagauz concerning this issue, and.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ This situation concerned more than 100 pupils, and the fact that not many peers lived nearby that spoke the state language as well as that qualified teachers were missing were mentioned as problems in talks with Irina Vlah and Petru Vlah. The latter had the impression that once somebody

authorities demanded the tests be repeated and warned they would award certificates themselves.¹⁹⁰ Interim President Marian Lupu held both the central government and the authorities in Gagauzia responsible for this situation, and asked for a “calm and negotiated solution between Gagauz authorities and the Education Ministry”.¹⁹¹ Finally in August, after a meeting between the Bashkan and the Prime Minister, a solution was found which allowed the students to commence their studies and repeat the language exams in 2012.¹⁹² According to Claus Neukirch, the truth was somewhere in between (to not want to learn the state language versus to not want to support its advancement). The problem started with the education system in Moldova, where language training across ethnic lines was not very efficient. The Romanian-speakers no longer learned Russian. To do so depended on the decision and involvement of the parents (which kindergarten to go to, language learning support in addition) - especially in homogeneous regions like Gagauzia where there was limited opportunity to speak the state language. At the same time, on a day-to-day basis one could survive in the country knowing only Russian; the position was the same in Chisinau. There were no incentives to learn the other language, and teaching was not strong. Unlike in the Baltic states, in Moldova things moved slowly with little pressure on minorities concerning this issue and with limited international support.¹⁹³

3.1.4.3. Representation in State Structures

Another important point - stated by one expert and reiterated by most interview partners in Comrat - was that Gagauzia wanted more of its representatives to work in state institutions; if the will existed, it was certainly possible to find competent persons to take high-level positions in ministries. It seemed that the Gagauz have always been poorly represented in government structures, but no actions have been taken to remedy the situation.¹⁹⁴ Section 3.1.5.1. deals with this aspect as well.

in Gagauzia had a problem, the local authorities exploited this for personal public relations activities.

¹⁹⁰ *Gagauzlar*, “Румынский как иностранный” [Romanian as a Foreign (Language)], 22 July 2011, at <http://www.gagauzlar.md/libview.php?l=ru&idc=312&id=2572&parent=0>.

¹⁹¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Moldovan Leader Spreads Blame for Language Tensions in Gagauzia”, 4 August 2011, at http://www.rferl.org/content/moldovan_leader_spreads_blame_for_tensions_in_gagauzia/2428709_8.html.

¹⁹² *Kommersant.md*, “Гагаузы помогли всем” [The Gagauz Helped All], 9 August 2011, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/4229>.

¹⁹³ Claus Neukirch. It was also pointed out by Irina Vlah that no statewide programme was in place to support minorities in the study of the state language.

¹⁹⁴ Liubomir Chiriac. He could only recall Mr Stoianoglu who had been deputy Prosecutor.

3.1.5. Selected Functions

3.1.5.1. Political Representation at the State Level

Representation of Gagauzia in the centre is currently ensured through three main provisions:

- (1) the electoral process;
- (2) the arrangements under the 1994 Law provide that all members of the Gagauz executive committee are members of government ministries in the centre, including an ex officio position for the Bashkan;
- (3) Gagauzia has the right to legislative initiative in the Republic of Moldova's national parliament. Wolff calls this feature unique as it has the potential to provide "an effective mechanism to introduce legislation in the national parliament in areas that remain in the competence of the central government but that have a particular impact on Gagauzia".¹⁹⁵

(1) A change in laws had a decisive influence on Gagauzia. From 1991, the Law on Political Parties and Social-Political Organizations went through various amendments before becoming an organic law in 2007. Since 1998, following another provision, it has become relatively complicated to found a party as a number of prerequisites have to be fulfilled, which is especially an obstacle to small ethnic groups.¹⁹⁶ The law requires that a party can only be registered if it has at least 5,000 members who reside in at least half of the intermediate-level administrative-territorial units, with at least 150 members in each of them. In fact, the law only led to the non-functioning of ethnic Gagauz parties in Gagauz Yeri.¹⁹⁷ Since then the local elites have demanded the opportunity to create political parties in the autonomy.¹⁹⁸

In their March 2010 study on party competition and legislative recruitment in Moldova, the results found by Oleh Protsyk and Ion Osonian depict the following situation for the Gagauz: in general, Moldova is characterized by multi-ethnic political organizations and, as statistics show, parties on the left spectrum especially are known for their diverse ethnic membership. Because of the Transnistria problem, proportional representation was chosen as the electoral formula.¹⁹⁹ By combining data on the ethnic distribution of the population with data on the ethnic composition of the Moldovan parliament, Protsyk and Osonian come to the conclusion that Gagauz are 'perfectly' represented from a statistical view, and at times had even been

¹⁹⁵ Stefan Wolff, "Representation of Autonomous Entities at the Level of the Central Government: Options and Recommendations for Gagauzia", December 2007, at <http://www.stefanwolff.com/publications/representation-of-autonomous-entities-at-the-level-of-the-central-government>. He advised in his study for the EU, with respect to the general framework found in Moldova, to keep these mechanisms and use them properly.

¹⁹⁶ Munteanu, *Political Parties Legislation in Moldova* ..., 66.

¹⁹⁷ Osonian and Protsyk, *Ethnic or Multi-Ethnic Parties?* ..., 7.

¹⁹⁸ Bowers, *The Moldovan Confederation* ..., 71-73.

¹⁹⁹ Osonian and Protsyk, *Ethnic or Multi-Ethnic Parties?* ..., 6.

overrepresented.²⁰⁰ MPs originating from Gagauzia – but not representing Gagauzia, however – agreed that they had sufficient opportunities to work for the autonomy in their parties, and that it depended on one’s will and initiative to do so. All parties were represented in Gagauzia, and so there were no obstacles to lobbying for Gagauz’ interests through them.²⁰¹ MP Petru Vlah noted that the political leaders of the ATU were also members of state wide political parties.²⁰²

A different view was held by interlocutors in Gagauzia: the autonomy’s interests were not represented properly in parties as they were not parties from there. One person mentioned that political parties “remembered” the Gagauz just before election times and it appeared to be a “matter of honour” to have a Gagauz in a leading position in a party.²⁰³ One expert stressed that the non-existence of a (regional) political party system in the autonomy also had an impact on the political representation and related processes within the ATU. A real structured political process was almost impossible in Gagauzia. Many independent candidates were always elected during polls, but without clear political affiliations and with changing positions it remained hard for the electorate to see politics in the form of parties and programmes. Therefore, to the electorate it would always be about personalities and village connections.²⁰⁴

As developments in 2011 and 2012 show, the topic of regional parties is still of significance in Gagauzia. At the beginning of 2011 the New Gagauzia movement gave details of plans to transform itself into the United Bujac party, a left-centrist, pro-Russia organization, which would also include representatives of the Taraclia district as well as ethnic Gagauz and Bulgarian associations from other parts of the country.²⁰⁵ In August a similar initiative was started by the Bashkan, whereby his party, which would unite with representatives of Taraclia would be called the ‘Party of Regions’.²⁰⁶ As the media asserted, increased verbal attacks on Mihail Formuzal originated in this new initiative.²⁰⁷ The local polls in Gagauzia in September 2012 again showed

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-19. Irina Vlah also mentioned the fact that about 4 per cent of MPs (4 persons, in 3 parties) were of Gagauz origin, which meant a proper representation in parliament. Before 2010, Gagauz had only been represented through the Communist party.

²⁰¹ Irina Vlah; Alexandru Stoianoglu.

²⁰² Petru Vlah.

²⁰³ Anonymous background talk; June 2011 - Vienna. Igor Botan stressed that the Gagauz were remembered by political parties mainly before elections came up.

²⁰⁴ Gottfried Hanne.

²⁰⁵ *Infotag*, “New Gagauzia Movement to be Transformed into Political Party”, 14 February 2011, at <http://totul.md/en/arhiv/newsitem/22525.html>. “The 20-year practice of struggle for national self-determination has shown that not a single all-republican political party in Moldova is able or cares to solve the problems existing in the territories inhabited by the Gagauz and Bulgarians, or to protect their interests on the republican level. Therefore, the new party will be working to unite healthy political forces, primarily of the Gagauzes and Bulgarians, to protect their interests at all levels.”

²⁰⁶ *Publika*, “Михаил Формузал планирует создать собственную политическую партию” [Mihail Formuzal Plans to Set up own Political Party], 28 August 2011, at http://ru.publika.md/link_265471.html.

²⁰⁷ *Gagauzlar*, “Скандал за скандалом: новый выпад Харламенко против Формузала” [Scandal after Scandal: New Insult by Harlamenko against Formuzal], 14 October 2011, at <http://www.gagauzlar.md/libview.php?l=ru&idc=295&id=2949&parent=0>.

the electorate's preference for 'independent candidates', whereas the future deputies all have a more or less direct affiliation to one of the political movements in the autonomy. The election of two members of the Liberal Democratic Party this time was a new development. Neither Formuzal's nor Dugoglu's new regional parties had fielded candidates in the local elections, however.

(2) Representatives of the executive power of Gagauzia also participate in corresponding committees on a state level to guarantee coordination in issues such as security or the economy. This cooperation, as stipulated by law, worked well, according to one MP.²⁰⁸ The Bashkan noted that as an ex officio member of the government, he could in principle raise any issue and come up with proposals, but it was impossible to obtain the consent of other members. Once when he voted against the budget, it was nevertheless adopted.²⁰⁹ He could not influence any processes, even those concerning Gagauzia.²¹⁰

(3) An analysis from 2008 pointed out that the People's Assembly never used its right for a legal initiative to propose a change with respect to the party law (1), which might give an indication about how important this issue really is.²¹¹ This option seemed not to be actively used in 2011 either.²¹² Then People's Assembly speaker Ana Harlamenko claimed that the parliament would not look at the legal initiatives, and they would not be considered in the committees. No contact existed with the assembly in Comrat, no information exchange took place and the local deputies were not included in any delegation. According to her, parliament, as the bigger institution, should contact the People's Assembly, and joint commissions were possible. "When we propose them something - there is simply no answer."²¹³

MP Alexandru Stoianoglu recalled that, in previous years, Comrat repeatedly demanded representation in Chisinau. From a formal point of view, this was not possible and in general the Gagauz should work on being competitive enough to achieve positions in central structures, and refrain from calls for ethnic quotas. The same should be the position for the parliament.²¹⁴ Concerning the right for legal initiatives, contradicting Ana Harlamenko, he explained that the People's Assembly would propose unrealistic projects (for example, concerning tax exclusions in Comrat), and

²⁰⁸ Alexandru Stoianoglu. Among all the experts, only he referred to this aspect of cooperation.

²⁰⁹ Irina Vlah. She claimed in her interview that the Bashkan had some power as he could block the budget, which he done during the Communists' tenure, but not in the past two years.

²¹⁰ Mihail Macar Formuzal. In his own words: "I participate there like a piece of furniture." Although the 1994 Law speaks about participation in the implementation of the Moldovan internal and external policies affecting the interests of Gagauzia, there was no concrete mechanism in place, Gagauzia can always be ignored and the Bashkan during government sessions outvoted, Gottfried Hanne explained his criticism.

²¹¹ Igor Botan, "Are Regional Parties really Necessary?", 6 March 2008, <http://www.alegeri.md/en/gagauzia2008/comments/20080306/>. He assessed that the isolation of the autonomy could probably be better changed through the language factor; regional parties might even deepen it.

²¹² Claus Neukirch.

²¹³ Ana Harlamenko.

²¹⁴ Alexandru Stoianoglu.

nothing that could be implemented was submitted.²¹⁵ MP Irina Vlah also saw that the right to legal initiatives was simply used for small proposals of local relevance. The People's Assembly had to be active and work for Gagauz issues because Chisinau would not care if it was inactive.²¹⁶

3.1.5.2. Legislative and Executive Rights

When Chisinau initiated the cancellation by the Constitutional Court of those provisions from the 1994 Law that would allow the People's Assembly to propose judges, the problems in relation to legislative and executive rights started.²¹⁷ This issue remained of concern to political activists in Comrat, as it was negatively highlighted that the Tribunal of Gagauzia - a court of second instance that was to function in the autonomy according to the Code of Gagauzia - had not been set up and therefore only Moldovan courts functioned in Gagauzia.²¹⁸

In early July 2011, a representative of the State Chancellery²¹⁹ had taken office in Comrat without properly informing the local authorities. Similar to the 2008 attempts to install a prefect in Gagauzia, which led to conflict with the centre, it seemed that Chisinau had established another control mechanism. This has already led to some discussions and was perceived with suspicion.²²⁰ Later in 2011, General Prosecutor Valeri Zubko asked the Constitutional Court to scrap the autonomy's right to nominate the local prosecutor, which is laid down in the Autonomy Statute; this was met with great protest in Comrat.²²¹ The initiative was based on the fact that, according to the Constitution of Moldova, the appointment of the judiciary was an exclusive competence of the national authorities. There have been no further developments, but it is likely that the issue will be addressed again.²²²

3.1.5.3. Embodiment of the Status Law

The change to the Constitution in 2003, though disputed by some, was a guarantee of the judicial strengthening of the autonomy. In addition, the change also meant that certain contradictions in the 1994 Law were

²¹⁵ Petru Vlah. Like his colleague from the Communist party, he stressed initiatives from Comrat would be looked at and discussed within the commissions.

²¹⁶ Irina Vlah.

²¹⁷ Gottfried Hanne.

²¹⁸ Nikolai Telpiz; Fiodor Gagauz; Ana Harlamenko. The latter said that the judges - who had to know Moldovan - would sometimes rule following Moldovan, sometimes Gagauzian law.

²¹⁹ The State Chancellery, at <http://www.ncu.moldova.md/en/index>.

²²⁰ Fiodor Gagauz; Ana Harlamenko. Asked if this institution can become a mechanism of dialogue or for solving questions between the entities, Fiodor Gagauz answered negatively as the representative seemed to have a control function, which was not welcomed in the autonomy. Vlah Petru, however, explained that the new representative had a neutral function under the Prime Minister, enabling the cooperation of the Prosecutor together with the executive committee. This structure could ask the local and other councils to present their resolutions if necessary.

²²¹ *Kommersant.md*, "Гагаузия протестует против сокращения полномочий автономии" [Gagauzia Protests against the Limitations of the Authority of the Autonomy, 9 November 2011, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/5461>].

²²² Email communication with Mihail Sirkeli, Pilgrim-Demo NGO, 3 June 2012.

confirmed.²²³ According to the hierarchy of laws, the autonomy would have to bring its laws into line with the state ones, whereas the Gagauz refer to the political compromise that was reached in the 1990s, which intended that Moldova would bring its laws into conformity.²²⁴

Despite continuing contradictory interpretations, all interviewed experts agreed that the current law systems were not corresponding to each other. Signed cooperation agreements between parliament and the People's Assembly have never been implemented.²²⁵ In general, MPs of Gagauz origin working in the parliament stressed their potential role as dialogue partners for colleagues from Comrat - an offer that has not been accepted to date.²²⁶

Other experts saw the problems in Chisinau. MPs in the Moldovan parliament did not know much about the autonomy and its laws, so the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had proposed - without success - the establishment of a People's Assembly liaison office to facilitate drafting laws and assist with checking the drafts.²²⁷ Ana Harlamenko reiterated the long-standing Gagauz demand that quotas should enable participation in parliament, and Gagauz also be represented in other levels of the state. As the speaker of the People's Assembly, she had no rights and could not participate in parliamentary commissions.²²⁸

MP Stoianoglu pointed out that the People's Assembly had competences in certain fields that were clearly laid down in the Autonomy Statute. Up until 2012, the deputies in the autonomy would - due to incompetence - simply copy state laws and then add their own ideas, which in the end led to juridical chaos and contradictions in the implementation of the laws. Furthermore, this process was not monitored and by 2012 a number of laws existed which went beyond the autonomy's competences.²²⁹

3.1.5.4. Revision Mechanisms of the Autonomy

In general, after the constitutional changes and with respect to the 1994 Law's status as organic law, a revision of the Autonomy Statute demanded a broad consensus in Chisinau and Comrat. Most experts referred to the continuing contradictions in the document, but calls for adaptations were not strong. One opinion was that changing the Autonomy Statute should not be talked about - only strengthening it should be discussed.²³⁰ MP Victor Popa

²²³ Victor Mocanu.

²²⁴ Igor Botan. This was also mentioned by Nikolai Telpiz as proof that the early promises had not been fulfilled by the central authorities and that the autonomy was being undermined.

²²⁵ Irina Vlah claimed that the authorities in Comrat appeared to have no interest in this.

²²⁶ Alexandru Stoianoglu; Petru Vlah.

²²⁷ Gottfried Hanne.

²²⁸ Ana Harlamenko. Victor Mocanu also remembered the case put forward by the People's Assembly some years ago where they had asked for change of the status of its deputies to the same as MPs in the parliament of Moldova, whereas this request was declined.

²²⁹ Alexandru Stoianoglu. According to Vlad Petru, for the past three years, not one law was adopted to improve the living standards of Gagauzia. Among the law initiatives sent to Chisinau, either the topics were unrealistic or focused on exclusions for inhabitants of Gagauzia, which were not possible.

²³⁰ Irina Vlah.

stressed that the statute was full of contradictions, but if somebody wanted to change it, this would be seen immediately as a violation of minority rights.²³¹ Pragmatic voices explained that very clear issues could easily be solved without changing the law.²³² Bashkan Formuzal actually reached agreement with the parliament to form a working group and discuss certain issues of the 1994 Law, especially concerning legislation and finances, but the working group never met.²³³ No other functioning commissions or mechanisms existed, other than through the Constitutional Court.²³⁴

A current issue and topic of discussion is the territorial structure of Gagauzia and attempts to change its geographic arrangement.²³⁵ Recently, it was observed that there was a tendency for people outside the autonomy to officially register in Comrat or close by in order to, for instance, get medical help. The parliament was against villages joining the autonomy, as this was perceived as separatism. In previous years, three villages wanted to join the ATU, and they had already been part of a joint district in Soviet times.²³⁶ Officially, it was possible via referenda to change the structure, something that had been done in other parts of the country, but in Gagauzia it was not allowed.²³⁷

3.1.5.5. *Autonomous Administration and Economic Aspects*

The disputed issue of the distribution of the budget was still an important topic in 2011. In general, the budget formation in Moldova was unclear and the authorities could not agree on how to manage it properly.²³⁸ As in other issues, the explanations in Chisinau differed from the positions in Comrat and a certain mix of contradiction, confusion and populism was apparent: for example, in Gagauzia the budget funds should comprise taxes collected in the autonomy, transfer payments and additional funds for bigger investments such as infrastructure. Also, the three Gagauz MPs gave varying budget figures, and said that they observed populism on the side of Comrat, especially since budget cuts would not only concern the autonomy but the whole country.²³⁹

In the first half of 2011, the press reported the ongoing dispute. The United Gagauzia movement said the central Moldovan authorities had “an unfair approach to Gagauzia’s budget formation”, and demanded the

²³¹ Victor Popa.

²³² Liubomir Chiriac.

²³³ Gottfried Hanne.

²³⁴ Irina Vlah. Like other experts, she agreed that a permanent dialogue between the centre and the autonomy was necessary.

²³⁵ In his paper, Avram pointed out that this provision could potentially create territorial instability. Avram, *Territorial Autonomy of the Gagauz ...*, 14-15.

²³⁶ Liubomir Chiriac explained that this case illustrated not only a problem in the south, but in general in the whole country, thanks to the administrative structure that had been introduced by the Communists, creating too many communities that were not in a financial situation to solve local problems. He asserted that maybe it would have been necessary to create such a precedent case.

²³⁷ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

²³⁸ Gottfried Hanne.

²³⁹ Irina Vlah; Alexandru Stoianoglu; Petru Vlah.

approval of the initial autonomy budget draft.²⁴⁰ The Bashkan said that, although he was a member of the government of Moldova, he did not know the criteria for the budget distribution, that is, if it was based on the size of the territory or the population. As Gagauzia had no lobby in the centre it had little opportunity to influence this process. The autonomy would be informed what it would receive, irrespective of whether it corresponded to its real needs or not.²⁴¹ Other politicians in the ATU decried the fact that the income from customs was taken away in 2006 and that, in general, rather than depending on Chisinau, Comrat should receive more autonomy in relation to finances.²⁴²

One issue that caused previous disputes was privatization,²⁴³ but it seems that since 2011 it is no longer on the table - in theory, the process should be finished.²⁴⁴ In 2006/2007, a new rule was introduced that made privatization the responsibility of local authorities, and the People's Assembly simply had to confirm the list. Also, questions concerning the regional economic policy were dealt with in Comrat.²⁴⁵

A 2008 report about the business environment in the autonomy came to the following conclusions: the legislative environment and frequent unexpected changes in laws were weaknesses; also, frequent controls, especially by the police, remained a problem. Many companies considered corruption a fundamental barrier to the development of their business in Gagauzia.²⁴⁶ In general, the significance of the economic situation in the ATU was pointed out by all experts; because of it, about 28 per cent of all male and female adults are abroad.²⁴⁷ On the one hand, separatist-minded groups in Comrat understand that the autonomy was too weak to survive on its own; with only 3-4 per cent of all investments in Moldova being made in Gagauzia, the outlook was not good. For this reason, development papers were elaborated and a donors' forum was also organized in 2009.²⁴⁸ After that no big investments were made in Gagauzia and no new jobs created, so the autonomy seems to be in economic isolation.²⁴⁹ A locally adopted law on

²⁴⁰ AZI, "United Gagauzia Movement Accuses Moldova Government of Insufficient Financing", 29 March 2011, at <http://www.azi.md/en/story/17404>.

²⁴¹ Mihail Macar Formuzal.

²⁴² Ana Harlamenko. However, most experts came to the conclusion that Gagauzia could not be self-sufficient and would always depend on transfer payments from the central budget.

²⁴³ Gottfried Hanne recalled that at some point, the central government had put property on the privatization list without asking Gagauzia.

²⁴⁴ Victor Mocanu.

²⁴⁵ Irina Vlah. Since then, no problems in this aspect have appeared.

²⁴⁶ Expert Grup, "Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia: Analysis of the Economic Situation and Development Potential", January-May 2008, at http://www.expert-grup.org/index.php?new_language=0&go=biblioteca&n=70,138.

²⁴⁷ Vitali Burlaca. He said that 15 per cent of children were left alone without parents in Gagauzia.

²⁴⁸ Liubomir Chiriac. See also, Igor Munteanu and Liubomir Chiriac, *The Strategy of Social and Economic Development of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) 2009-2015* (Viitorul, Chisinau, 2009). Liubomir Chiriac explained that the aim was for regional cooperation via the Euroregion Lower Danube, and there was still a lot of potential for fruitful investment in this area.

²⁴⁹ Irina Vlah. This was despite the fact that the autonomy possessed a number of investment-friendly aspects, like tax reduction and other incentives that could be adopted for individual cases by the People's Assembly. A free economic zone was established in the very south of the autonomy: See the corresponding website at <http://www.freezone-valcanes.md/portal/index.php>.

foreign investment was called a destabilizing and obstacle-creating document.²⁵⁰ In the summer of 2012, Bashkan Formuzal called on the president of the Republic to take note of the politically motivated actions against enterprises in the autonomy.²⁵¹

3.1.5.6. *International Relations*

Many experts were keen to point out that such types of stipulated relations could only be directed towards economic and cultural or other cooperation, but not diplomatic relations.²⁵² At the moment of writing in 2012, Gagauzia has “representatives of the ATU Gagauz Yeri” in ten countries.²⁵³

3.1.5.7. *Civil Society, Media and Human Rights*

When talking about minorities in Gagauzia,²⁵⁴ Bulgarians are mentioned most frequently. Unlike the Gagauz, Bulgarians remained “passive and less passionate” after 1989, and were mainly found in the neighbouring Taraclia district.²⁵⁵ Relations between ethnic groups could be considered as calm and harmonious.²⁵⁶ However, few Bulgarians lived within Gagauzia, in fact only in the village of Kirsovo they settled next to Gagauz.²⁵⁷ By the end of the 1990s, the People’s Assembly accepted Bulgarian as an official language, but this idea did not function in practice.²⁵⁸ MP Petru Vlah could not recall any problems in the sphere of inter-ethnic relations in Gagauzia.²⁵⁹

In general, interlocutors did not see any problems in the field of freedom of media in the autonomy. The only regular Gagauz language newspaper was Ana Sözü, published once a month in Chisinau. One person at times published Aru Töz and Gagauz Yeri in the local language. Seven other Russian publications, regional or in cities only, were issued on a weekly basis. Two radio stations and eight television stations, private as well as public, were broadcasting, though mainly in Russian.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁰ Alexandru Stoianoglu.

²⁵¹ *Infotag*, “Gagauzia Governor Urging Moldovan President to Consider Raider Phenomenon Developing in Autonomous Region”, 1 August 2012, at <http://www.infotag.md/news-en/596275/>.

²⁵² For instance, see the expert talk with Victor Popa.

²⁵³ Official Website of Gagauzia, List of Representatives from 2010, at <http://www.gagauzia.md/pageview.php?l=ru&idc=470&nod=1&>.

²⁵⁴ The Law of the Republic of Moldova on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of their Organizations, at <http://www.usefoundation.org/view/437>, “guarantees equality before the law and equal protection before the law to persons belonging to national minorities. Any kind of discrimination based on the national minority affiliation is prohibited”.

²⁵⁵ Oazu Nantoi. He mentioned that four political movements with a Bulgarian background were registered in Moldova.

²⁵⁶ Ivan Grec. Ivan gave as reasons the joint history and faith over the past decades.

²⁵⁷ Dimitri Ivanovitsh Popozoglo (journalist, editor of *Edinaja Gagauzia*; 23 July 2011 - Comrat. During a visit to the settlement, it was explained that the main street actually used to divide the Gagauz and Bulgarian neighbourhoods, something that has changed in recent years. See also Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*

²⁵⁸ Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 55.

²⁵⁹ Petru Vlah.

²⁶⁰ Dimitri Ivanovitsh Popozoglo. There was no printing press, however, and everything had to be ordered in Chisinau.

It was easy to find a non-governmental organization (NGO), and about 350 were registered in Gagauzia. Most of them worked on a project basis, focused on sports and religion, but only eight could be considered to be really active. In July 2011, only a Turkish foundation had a branch in Comrat, otherwise no donor organisations were present. Most of the financial support came from abroad, 80 per cent of grants were made directly, and contact with civil society in Chisinau was not too strong.²⁶¹ Freedom of speech existed and, as shown in the aftermath of the last Bashkan election, demonstrations took place. However, the general political culture and understanding of certain norms were not very high.²⁶²

Civil society representatives were not aware of any special institution dealing with human rights in Gagauzia, and if there was an ombudsman's office in Comrat, it was obviously not very visible and well known.²⁶³ Reports showed that corruption in Gagauzia had similar traits to that in the rest of the country, except for the 'leader Chisinau', and in some areas (bureaucratic burden, bribery) rated quite high on a national level.²⁶⁴

The police was not under society's control; in combination with weak courts, corruption was frequent. To open a shop in a village, one would have to 'arrange himself' with the local authorities, and to simply sell products in the bazar in Comrat required an additional, unofficial payment. It was possible to talk and write about these things, but everybody was well aware of the situation. Many people had Bulgarian and/or Romanian passports - it was not hard to present appropriate proof to obtain citizenship in the neighbouring countries.²⁶⁵ People saw the permanent fights between the executive and legislative, how abnormal their dialogue was, and therefore had no trust in the court system. They were tired, passive and did not believe in change. During elections, fraud through multiple voting was frequent, and people that participated did so for money. At the same time, there were not many seminars to educate citizens about their rights.²⁶⁶ During the pre-election period in Gagauzia in 2012 it also became obvious that the civil society in the autonomy was weak and could not take civil control over ongoing processes.²⁶⁷ However, election observation activities and reporting took place by local NGOs.²⁶⁸

²⁶¹ Vitali Burlaca.

²⁶² Mihail Sirkeli. He mentioned as an example that the candidate that had officially lost the elections had not even prepared a proper appeal against the result and could hardly present any proof for his accusations in order to repeat the vote.

²⁶³ Vitali Burlaca; Mihail Sirkeli. The general opinion was that such an office would also not be much trusted by people.

²⁶⁴ Transparency International - Moldova, "Corruption and Tax Evasion: Economic Dimension", (2003), at http://transparency.md/Docs/cor_evaz_fisc_en.pdf. Telephone interview with Carasciuc Lilia (of Transparency International - Moldova; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

²⁶⁵ This was also observed by Hatlas and Zyromski, *Power, Administration and Ethnic Minorities ...*, 47.

²⁶⁶ Round-up of opinions with a few citizens in Gagauzia, speaking on the basis of anonymity. They asked to not be named as this form of criticism was not well perceived in the autonomy.

²⁶⁷ *Kommersant.md*, "Выборочное законодательство" [Electoral Legislation], 23 May 2012, at <http://www.kommersant.md/node/8198>.

²⁶⁸ Pilgrim-Demo Youth Centre conducted an election observation and produced corresponding reports. Materials were provided by the NGO to the author on 16 September 2012 by email and can be found

3.2. Conclusion

No armed confrontations have been documented since the birth of the ATU Gagauzia in 1994. The elite of the country and its population still support the existence of this territorial solution to accommodate the Gagauz' demands and acknowledge a certain degree of self-rule for them.

The expert discussions and analysis of existing sources about the state of the autonomy revealed many negative aspects: of a number of issues that were deemed problematic or disputed in previous years until a new government came into power in Chisinau in 2009, only the topic of privatization appears to be off the table because this process is considered to be finished. However, most other aspects that have dominated the discussions between Comrat and Chisinau, or were identified by scholars to be/come problematic, remain unresolved in 2012. Among the main stumbling blocks are:

- The lack of dialogue and reform perspectives, including on the legal framework, because of a mix of political interests, ignorance and scarce resources;
- The missing capacities and inefficient use of existing mechanisms - either in the People's Assembly concerning legal initiatives, or in the government by not perceiving the Bashkan as an equal player;
- The sticking to old political agendas and promoting unrealistic goals;
- The low incentives and support for integration, especially in terms of education and language;
- The insufficient protection and promotion of the Gagauz culture and language by Chisinau as well as Comrat;
- The absence of a clear, transparent, timely and corresponding budget formation and distribution process;
- The potential changes to the territorial arrangement of Gagauzia and the possibility of future conflicts due to attempts to increase centralization.

While a peaceful coexistence in Moldova and within Gagauzia can be observed, the lack of development of their native Gagauz language shows that the level of protection of the ethno-cultural identity of the Gagauz is not high - it might even be fair to say that it will be under threat if no fundamental steps are taken. Discrimination in the country is not directly against the Gagauz; however, they have fewer chances in the education system due to entry barriers linked to the knowledge of the state language. In addition, it seems that there is, to a large extent, popular support for the dominant role of the Russian language in the autonomy.

The unity of Moldova was preserved through the autonomy solution, but a number of aspects raise doubts that a significant level of self-rule was

at <http://www.e-democracy.md/files/elections/gagauzia2012/report-pilgrim-demo-elections-gagauzia-09-09-2012-ru.pdf>.

achieved. From a legal perspective, the hierarchy of laws - even if considered clear by some experts - remains disputed, and the state authorities continue to ignore the Autonomy Statute. Gagauzia keeps on ignoring certain provisions of the Constitution and refrain from updating its own legislative framework. On the one hand, a lack of capacity on both sides might be a problem, such as a degree of ignorance, but resistance towards perceived interference and control from the centre is also apparent in Comrat. While consensus exists in the expert community and among political representatives of different backgrounds that a dialogue is missing and that the current situation should not continue, mechanisms to break the deadlock are not used, are inappropriate or simply missing. One of the main problems of the 1994 Law is the fact that a facilitation organ was not included: it could play a role in reforming the arrangements and encouraging political actors to engage in dialogue and come to solutions, even through informal ways. As the case of the university entry exams in summer 2011 showed, after the Bashkan and the Prime Minister met to discuss this issue - preceded by confrontational politics, orchestrated via the media - a temporary solution was found. While this is a positive sign, the underlying structural problem was not tackled, and a similar situation might arise in the future. It also appears that the long practice of "salami tactics"²⁶⁹ aimed at reducing the scope of the autonomy is still followed as the General Prosecutor's initiative has shown.

In Chisinau, the position remains that the Gagauz elite are unable to raise the level of the autonomy and visibly improve the protection of their culture and language. Officially, Gagauzia was fully integrated and as long as it did not pose any problems it would be considered an 'exemplary solution'.²⁷⁰ However, the incentives for the autonomy to integrate in the state remain at a minimum level, and it raises the question as to whether this is a specific or a general phenomenon concerning other regions of the country. But even if so, by agreeing to grant the autonomy, the Republic of Moldova took over some obligations and the political compromise of 1994 demanded concrete steps from central authorities, which so far have not been taken. Rather than understanding the arrangement as a reform process and chance to prove that Moldova can accommodate its minorities appropriately, the approach towards the south gives the impression that the autonomy is to some extent only existent on paper or treated according to a feudal model. Another relevant aspect, as other scholars foresaw, is the recovery of the central state: it seemingly made the authorities less willing to cede control through the

²⁶⁹ Protsyk and Rigamonti, "Real and 'Virtual' Elements ...", 8-10.

²⁷⁰ A typical official position was, for instance, displayed by Elena Beleacova, Director General of the Office of Interethnic Relations of Moldova: when asked by UN experts as head of the delegation about the possibility of Gagauz integrating into Moldovan society, she gave the following reply: "The delegation said the autonomy granted to Gagauz was the most effective solution arrived at for the problems faced by its people. The Gagauz were fully integrated in Moldovan political and social life as their elected authorities were full members of the Moldovan executive and legislative bodies." The delegation stated that there was no segregation in relation to the Gagauz. OHCHR, "Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Considers Report of the Republic of Moldova", 2 March 2011, at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10790&La>.

institutionalization of the autonomy.²⁷¹ The growing tax collecting and service delivery capacities of the Moldovan state, however, contribute little to empower the autonomy.²⁷²

A clear demand, as well as a potential obstacle for integration, is the need for knowing the state language; if enough resources and opportunities were offered to the Gagauz to enable them to learn Moldovan, the discussion of why they would not want to do so would be different. Currently, the situation does not support such any developments and it is striking to see that no improvements have been reached in the past 20 years. Likewise, it would strengthen the position of the central authorities and mean a further consolidation of the country if the state followed its commitment as stipulated in the 2001 Law of the Republic of Moldova on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of their Organizations (Chapter II, Article 5, Point 1), that it “assumes the obligation to facilitate the creation of necessary conditions for the persons belonging to national minorities be able to preserve, develop and express their ethnical, cultural, linguistic and religious identities”.²⁷³

If the Republic of Moldova provided enough support or at least communicated a clear commitment to help the Gagauz develop their mother tongue, this distrust could be limited or even be eliminated, with the additional benefit of lowering Russian dominance in the region - which is a clear objective of the current (and previous) governments in power. The most contentious issues in past years, which are still a problem for relations between Comrat and Chisinau and bear substantial potential for conflict, are the budget formation and the territorial arrangement of the region. The financial question is used informally to exert control and stress the autonomy's dependence, which poses risks to good governance and does not raise sympathies towards the centre. In general, the spirit of the autonomy agreement, such as its content, speak against treating the ATU like a normal district - even though some of the problems Gagauzia is facing can be found in surrounding districts as well. The territorial set-up of the autonomy can be changed through referendums as stipulated by law and clarified by the Constitutional Court, but there are indications that Chisinau is against using this option. Clearly, therefore, the Moldovan state has to resolve the issues at stake that concern local communities and that appear, at least in part, to be matters of administrative changes, otherwise the shape of Gagauzia will de facto and at some point de jure be subject to enlargement. As this would involve mainly Bulgarian and Moldovan villages, this could also imply new dynamics within Gagauz Yeri itself.

If the capital spares Comrat from the ongoing centralization drive and respects its special status, then increased integration within Europe will also imply more opportunities for Gagauzia. Among the positive factors having the

²⁷¹ Protsyk and Rigamonti, “Real and ‘Virtual’ Elements ...”, 14.

²⁷² As Protsyk, “Gagauz Autonomy in Moldova ...”, 248, analysed.

²⁷³ Law of the Republic of Moldova on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of their Organizations, at <http://www.usefoundation.org/view/437>.

potential to influence this state-autonomy relationship, EU integration is clearly the greatest, and can rely on growing trust and support in the autonomy. The real influence of Turkey and the Russian Federation, in addition to their financial aid, is based on many years of support and sentiments. In particular, the popularity of pan-Slavic political programmes and attitudes imply that the Soviet identity is still the strongest in Gagauzia. A continued opening up of the region and perspectives for transborder cooperation might also bring a slow challenge to this manifested identity.

An interesting perspective in the expert talks were the differing attitudes and proposals by the MPs of Gagauz origin, whose criticism, though certainly not free from political party considerations, was mainly directed at their fellow colleagues in power in Comrat. While parts of the Gagauz elite do not want to perceive those MPs as representatives of the autonomy, they could be challenged further to step forward for the rights of their fellow people. The question remains if the chance to form parties in Gagauzia as an exception would foster integration in the political life of Moldova, and if this helped to structure the political process in the autonomy. At the same time, the ongoing mobilization to influence decision-making via regional parties with a strong Gagauz component could be an interesting contribution to democratic processes in the country.

The role and responsibilities of the state - even though weak and faced with economic difficulties - towards the territorial autonomy cannot be stressed enough; but also the political representatives of Gagauzia cannot reject their duties and role in the continuing standstill. Frustrations are high and the initial hopes for improved cooperation after the change in power in the capital appear to be quite diminished, whereas the elites in Comrat have not contributed positively to any substantial improvements recently. Elites are caught in internal struggles and infighting that prohibits even the adoption of laws on an autonomy level and partially infringed the holding of local elections. Furthermore, personal politics and certain populism, like unrealistic demands and laws, are the dominating factors in local politics.

Some of the mechanisms in place to give the Gagauz a voice in decision-making in the centre are not working. In this respect it should also be reflected upon what the ex officio government position of the Bashkan gives to the autonomy if it retains a rather symbolic value. Opportunities such as the legal initiative right are not used to their fullest, if at all, and the question arises as to how far cooperation and communication with the centre is really on the agenda of local elites. The latter should not refrain from finding solutions by working together with international actors but should utilize the chance to set a new imperative to the 1994 Law. There is a valid argument, as well as a legitimate wish, to professionalize the official structures of the ATU, especially the People's Assembly.

There are some proposals for improvements and the core of the problems seems clear, but cooperation from the autonomy's authorities and more pragmatism, as well as clear action, for the support of the Moldovan state are needed. With respect to the renewed transformation processes in the country, with a president having been elected in March 2012 and the positive

cooperation with the EU, now it might be time for the Gagauz elite to reflect upon old demands (such as Russian as a state language and calls for federalization) and to update its agenda to positively contribute to the state's future challenges.

According to Webster, the country learned from the parliamentary deadlocks that occurred in 1988 to 1995 and thereafter made institutional changes that strengthened the majority party. The final result of this process was the creation of a parliamentary system in 2000. The "impressive resolution of the Gagauz question" serves also as evidence that the country was resisting moves towards a more authoritative regime.²⁷⁴ This follows academic findings that "autonomous bodies can play a significant role in shaping and restructuring internal political and administrative mechanisms".²⁷⁵ In one expert talk, it was mentioned that the Gagauz play, and could do so even more intensively, a role in relations with Turkey and also in relations with Russia.²⁷⁶ Besides these two aspects - the historic role in shaping the state's build-up and in fostering relations with Turkey, and (potentially) the Russian Federation - Gagauzia has played a minor role in state-building in Moldova. When it comes to a solution for the Transnistrian conflict, the autonomy will wake up again and will have to be taken into account for potential changes of the Constitution, otherwise conflict is unavoidable. It seems too late to present Gagauzia as a functioning model to the Transnistrian elite; but it would only bear positive aspects if an ongoing development of Moldova, in economic, juridical and democratic terms, had an impact on the autonomy as well and respected, rather than ignored, its opinion in issues of direct concern. The autonomy has closed the first chapter of a secessionist conflict in a peaceful way, but if the Gagauz are not taken on board in relation to European integration, further demands to enforce self-determination could pose a new obstacle for state-building efforts in Moldova.

From a rather feudal interpretation of this autonomy, both from a Chisinau - Comrat as well as internal Comrat perspective, Gagauzia could at some point have the potential to develop into a regional autonomy.²⁷⁷ Interpreted and used in a positive sense as a changing, flexible concept, combined with strong rules of law that are clearly established and based on democratic principles, that would mean a maximum autonomy level and a wide range of external competencies - something the Gagauz are increasingly developing. The key conditions in Danspeckgruber's concept, the "acceptance of multiple identities" as well as a flexible political culture,²⁷⁸ to some extent already exist in Gagauz Yeri, and would be further encouraged by transborder

²⁷⁴ Webster, *Parliamentary Majorities ...*, 275-278.

²⁷⁵ Gnanapal Welhengama, *Minorities Claims: From Autonomy to Secession: International Law and State Practice* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000), 169.

²⁷⁶ Igor Botan.

²⁷⁷ As described by Wolfgang F. Danspeckgruber, "Self-Governance plus Regional Integration", in Marc Weller and Stefan Wolff (eds.), *Autonomy, Self-Governance and Conflict Resolution: Innovative Approaches to Institutional Design in Divided Societies* (Routledge, London, 2005), 26-48, at 37-39.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

activities and regional integration - a process that seems to be in development, despite obvious concerns by central authorities.

The formula of the "functioning of the Gagauz autonomy as an indicator of maturity of the Moldovan state"²⁷⁹ will thereby still be valid and the authorities in Moldova, as well as in Gagauzia, will further be judged by their actions in the years to come. If the full political spectrum of the country agrees that the autonomy is an irreversible process that always considers the special rights and demands of the minority with whom an agreement had been reached, and the Gagauz elite likewise show openness for reform and consider the position of the rest of the country more seriously, the basis for a new dialogue would exist. As a living autonomy, Gagauzia could potentially bring good to the Republic of Moldova.

²⁷⁹ Baku Today, "OSCE: The Functioning of the Gagauz Autonomy: An Indicator of Maturity of the Moldovan State", 14 June 2011, at <http://www.bakutoday.net/osce-the-functioning-of-the-gagauz-autonomy-an-indicator-of-maturity-of-the-moldovan-state.html>.

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4.3. Expert Talks (order by appearance in the text, transcription of names as stated on business cards or organisation websites)

Stepan Mihailovitch Topal (advisor to the Bashkan; elected president of the self-proclaimed Gagauz Sovie Socialist Republic; interviewed on 22 July 2011 in Comrat).

Ljubov Stepanovna Tshimpoesh (Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, head of the sector for Gagauz ethnology; 25 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Ivan Grec (historian, writer, former MP; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Nikolai Telpiz (Deputy Head of the New Gagauzia public movement; 21 July 2011 - Comrat).

Mihail Macar Formuzal (Bashkan of Gagauzia, former mayor of Ciadur-Lunga; 21 July 2011 - Comrat).

Gottfried Hanne (former Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova; 8 June 2011 - Vienna).

Victor Popa (MP of the Liberal Party, Chair of the Legal, Appointments and Immunities Committee; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Oazu Nantoi (Director of Programs of the Institute for Public Policy, former presidential advisor; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Fiodor Gagauz (Chairman of the public organization 'United Gagauzia'; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

Ana Harlamenko (Speaker of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

Igor Botan (executive director of ADEPT - Association for Participatory Democracy; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Claus Neukirch (outgoing Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova; 26 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Liubomir Chiriac (executive director of the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) 'Viitorul'; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Alexandru Stoianoglu (MP of the Democratic Party, Chair of the Commission on national security, defence and public order, former deputy prosecutor of Moldova; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Irina Vlah (MP of the Communist Party; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Petru Vlah (MP of the Liberal Democratic Party, Parliamentary Commission for human rights and inter-ethnic relations; 25 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Anonymous background talk; June 2011 - Vienna. The interlocutor is involved in the "5+2" talks.

Background talks with diplomats; 27 June 2011 - Vienna.

Mihail Sirkeli (Pilgrim-Demo NGO; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

Victor Mocanu (expert in central and local government of the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) 'Viitorul'; 19 July 2011 - Chisinau).

Background talk with an EU diplomat; July 2011 - Chisinau.

Vitali Burlaca (Stability NGO; 22 July 2011 - Comrat).

Mihail Konstantinov (Director of the Gagauz National Theatre named after M. Cakir; 23 July 2011 - Cadir-Lunga).

Email communication with Mihail Sirkeli, Pilgrim-Demo NGO; 3 June 2012.

Dimitri Ivanovitsh Popozoglo (journalist, editor of Edinaja Gagauzia; 23 July 2011 - Comrat)

Telephone interview with Carasciuc Lilia (of Transparency International - Moldova; 20 July 2011 - Chisinau).

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