



RECONCILING WESTERN ASPIRATIONS AND EASTERN SYMPATHIES: THE CASE OF MOLDOVA AND GAGAUZIA

On November 15, 2020, Moldova held the second round of its fourth regular presidential election, on which the incumbent President Igor Dodon ran against his main rival Maia Sandu, who represented the pro-European electorate of Moldova. The victory of Maia Sandu over President Igor Dodon, who took anti-European and pro-Russian stance, by a margin of 57.72% to 42.28% clearly showed the prevalence of the pro-European sentiments among Moldovans. At the same time, the final results of the presidential election have also shown a high degree of polarization of the Moldovan electorate by different parameters. Thus, incumbent president Igor Dodon is highly popular among ethnic minorities, elderly population and Moldovan migrants living in Russia and other former Soviet states while Maia Sandu has large proportions of support amongst youth, ethnic Moldovans living in central regions of the country and those living in western countries.

Gagauzia is one of the regions of Moldova where the level of support of pro-Russian and/or anti-European political forces has traditionally been exceptionally high. Thus, in the second round of presidential election of 2020, President Igor Dodon received 94.59% of the votes in Gagauzia, which is the highest share of votes among regions of Moldova in favor of either candidates. In the previous presidential election of 2016, 98.89% of the votes in Gagauzia went in favor of Igor Dodon. Pro-Russian and anti-European candidates and parties in elections always win by tremendous margins in Gagauzia.

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz: *Gagauz Yeri*) is an administrative division within Moldova that enjoys a great degree of political autonomy. It has an area of 1,832 sq.km, which is 5.4% of the territory of Moldova, and has a population of 161.7 thousand people. The population of Gagauzia is predominantly rural, with only 36.2% living in urban areas. The capital and largest city of Gagauzia is the city of Comrat, which has a population of nearly 20 thousand people. Over four fifths of the population are ethnic Gagauz people who are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group who, unlike most other Turkic-speaking people, profess Orthodox Christian faith. The rest of the population besides ethnic kin group Moldovans are composed of Ukrainian, Russian and Bulgarian minorities. During the process of the collapse of the USSR, Gagauzia struggled with the Moldovan government

trying to become an independent republic and declared independence in 1991. However, in 1994 Gagauzia was peacefully reintegrated to Moldova as a "National-Territorial Autonomous Unit" and was granted a right to self-determination along with other political powers. The fact is that the Gagauz language, which is one of the official languages of Gagauzia along with Romanian and Russian, belongs to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic languages. Hence, Gagauz language is very related and mutually understandable with Turkish, Azerbaijani and Crimean Tatar languages. However, it should be admitted that Russian is more commonly used than Gagauz or Moldovan languages in Gagauzia, and the Gagauz language and identity often serves as a political and sociocultural tool to differentiate Gagauzia from the rest of Moldova.

Apart from its own ethnic identity and cultural originality, Gagauzia differs a lot from the rest of Moldova in terms of preferences and views on some of the important political issues in the country. As it was mentioned earlier, presidential candidates with anti-European, pro-Russian and pro-Communist agenda easily get the biggest winning margins on elections in Gagauzia. The same regularity applies to legislative elections. Parties from socialist, communist and Eurosceptic spectrums regularly get landslide victories in Gagauzia. For instance, in the recent parliamentary election of 2019, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) got 31.15% of the votes nationwide in Moldova, while in Gagauzia it received 83.72% of the vote cast. The general political views of the people of Gagauzia are characterized by extreme Euroscepticism, Moldovenism (strong adherence to the Moldovan identity), Russophilia and Social Conservatism. Gagauzia heavily opposed every single European initiative of the Government of Moldova and decisively stood for any movement towards closer alliance with Russia. One of the brightest indicators of the political views of the people of Gagauzia was the referendum of 2014 initiated by the communist faction, on which 98.9% of the residents of Gagauzia indicated that they would support independence of Gagauzia in case if Moldova lost its sovereignty, and 98.47% of them wanted Moldova to be member of the Customs Union, which nowadays is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Interestingly, Gagauz people are among the most ardent supporters of Moldovenism and Moldovan independence.

Any mention of unification of Moldova with Romania produce strong and negative reactions among the residents of Gagauzia.

Despite its compact geographic, economic and demographic dimensions, Gagauzia has gained certain political significance at the regional level. For actors like Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and Romania, the factor of Gagauzia has become an important one in their relations with Moldova during recent years. For example, in August 2020 Turkey opened its Consulate General in Comrat, and so did Ukraine in October 2020. Russia maintains friendly relations with Gagauzia and welcomes its efforts to establish more intense cooperation with the EAEU. From the point of view of neighboring Romania and the supporters of the idea of unification of Romania with Moldova, Gagauzia is seen as one of the major obstacles. There is no doubt that Gagauzia would proclaim its independence if Moldova decided to become a part of Romania.

Several reasons contributed to increased and manifold political importance of this small Turkic minority in Moldova over the last several years. Firstly, the Moldova's sympathies towards Europe under conditions of growing divide between Russia and the West created agitations in Gagauzia, which caused a political mobilization among Gagauz people. Secondly, the situation around Crimea raised Chisinau's concerns over its territorial integrity and political stability. The central government of Moldova definitely did not want to have a second Transnistria problem on its southern territories, which made it reconsider its stance towards its Turkic minority population. Thirdly, the relative advances that Moldova made in Eastern Partnership before 2016, compared to its other members, and recent revitalization of pro-European sentiments in the Moldovan politics that culminated with the election of Sandu put the Gagauz agenda at the forefront of Moldovan politics.

The presidential election of 2020 in Moldova has shown the willingness of the Moldovan people to revitalize its movement towards the European integration. The advancement of Moldova towards Europe within the Eastern Partnership initiative is likely to accelerate after the early parliamentary election scheduled for 2021. However, the factor of different minorities and that of Gagauzia, in particular, will require new and balanced policies from the government of Moldova in their efforts to reinstate their movement towards Europe.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Government delegations of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had a meeting in Bishkek, where they discussed issues of border delimitation and demarcation. The Chairman of the State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiyev, headed the Kyrgyzstan's delegation, while Uzbekistan was represented by the Deputy Prime Minister, Mehridin Khairiddinov. According to Tashiyev, rapid completion of legal registration of the state border with Uzbekistan is of high importance for Kyrgyzstan in order to create favorable conditions for citizens (Kabar.kg, 15.12.2020).
- On December 18, 2020, the Council of Heads of States of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had an online meeting. The Council approved a revised concept for further development of the organization and a plan of the main measures. The new document outlines economic cooperation as the key priority for the member states with a focus on further development of the free trade zone, digital economy and information security (BelTA.by, 18.12.2020).
- On December 14, 2020, working groups from India, Iran and Uzbekistan held an online meeting and discussed joint usage of the Chabahar Port. President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev made this proposal three days before, during the virtual summit with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Representatives of India proposed to hold "Chabahar Day" within the International Maritime Summit that will be hosted by India next month. The parties mentioned an important role that the Chabahar Port played in regional trade and transportation (The Tribune, 14.12.2020).
- Election campaigns of presidential candidates, which will last until January 9, 2021, kicked off in Kyrgyzstan. Eighteen candidates will compete for the presidency of the Republic where 3,544,403 citizens will have a right to vote on the Election Day scheduled for January 10, 2021. In total, 2,475 polling stations will be available in the country on the Election Day and 45 abroad (Russian.news.cn, 15.12.2020).
- Foreign and defense ministers of Ukraine and Turkey held a 2+2 meeting in the quadrilateral format. During the meeting, the parties confirmed their commitments to implement previously reached agreements and expand cooperation in political, economic, socio-cultural and defense fields, and issued a joint declaration. The Turkish side expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and reiterated its support for Ukraine in its integration with the EU and NATO (Aa.com.tr, 19.12.2020).
- Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, paid a working visit to the Kingdom of Belgium, where he met with the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement, Oliver Varhely. The sides discussed issues of bilateral cooperation and partnership between Azerbaijan and the EU in trade, energy, transport and connectivity. Speaking about the current situation in the region, the Foreign Minister spoke about the development of a new security framework and prospects for cooperation in the region with the cessation of hostilities (Azernews.az, 19.12.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- During eight months of 2020, Turkey's exports of chemical products to Kazakhstan amounted to \$61.2 million, increasing by 14.6% compared to the same period last year. However, in August 2020, Turkey supplied products worth \$6.04 million, which was 10.2% lower than in August 2019. From January to August 2020, Turkey's export of chemical products to the global market decreased by 14% and equaled \$11.4 billion. Exports of chemicals accounted for 11.2% of the country's total exports (Kazinform.kz, 20.12.2020).
- Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Alexander Novak, visited Saudi Arabia and had a meeting with his Saudi counterpart, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman in Riyadh, during which they discussed cooperation in the OPEC+ multilateral format. Following the bilateral meeting, Novak noted that both Russia and Saudi Arabia had confirmed commitment to the OPEC+ deal. He also mentioned that Russia's cooperation with Saudi Arabia aimed to recover the oil market. In January 2021, the alliance will gradually increase crude oil production by 2 million barrels per day (TASS, 20.12.2020).
- A volume of Uzbekistan's foreign debt increased during nine months of 2020. According to the recent report of Uzbekistan's Central Bank, as of October 1st it amounted to \$29.3 billion, increasing by 19.7% or by \$4.8 billion. The public and private sector debt increased by \$2.9 and \$1.9 billion, respectively. Higher borrowing of banks and textile enterprises caused growth of the private sector debt. In total, private sector attracted loans worth \$3 billion (Kabar, 18.12.2020).
- According to data from the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan, in October 2020, migrant remittances amounted to \$226.2 million and increased by \$40 million than in September 2020 and by \$5.8 million than in October 2019. During 10 months of the current year, migrant remittances equaled almost \$2 billion, which is lower by 45.6 million than in the same period last year. In 2019, migrant remittances exceeded \$2.4 billion. Russia's share in total remittance inflows amounted to 98% (24.kg, 17.12.2020).
- Surplus in foreign trade balance positively contributed to the growth of Azerbaijan's strategic foreign exchange reserves. According to the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA), the reserves increased by 3.3% since the beginning of 2020 and amounted to \$50 billion, exceeding the country's annual gross domestic product. According to the Chairman of the CBA Elman Rustamov, the financial sector of the country will end this year with good indicators, despite uncertainties remaining in the global market (Azernews.az, 18.12.2020).
- The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) and the Moldovan Chamber of Commerce and Industry signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the establishment of the "Turkey-Moldova Chamber of Commerce and Industry Forum." The MoU was signed as part of the "Expo Business Moldova 2020," organized by the Moldovan Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The new Chamber of Commerce is expected to boost the volume of trade and investments between Turkey and Moldova taking advantage of the existing free trade agreement (Tobb.org.tr, 15.12.2020).

Society and Culture

- The Embassy of Kazakhstan in the Republic of Korea and the National Academic Library of Kazakhstan held an online presentation of a collection of Abai's poems "Alтын shakyrakta shyrgalghan en" (The song sung in the spiritual home) in Korean. The poems of the prominent Kazakh poet and philosopher were also read in Kazakh by students of the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. The event was attended by well-known members of the academia from relevant fields (Inform.kz, 15.12.2020).
- The Government of Russia allocated \$2 million for the implementation of the new UNDP project called "Accelerating Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery through Improved Livelihood, Employability, and Regional Cooperation in Fergana Valley". The project intends to improve livelihoods and develop entrepreneurship in rural areas of the Fergana Valley in Tajikistan. The signing ceremony of the project took place at the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan on 17 December 2020 (Tj.undp.org, 17.12.2020).
- The UNDP launched the Climate diplomacy and security project for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Presentation of the project was held in Bishkek. The project is intended to foster regional cooperation on climate policy, involving academia and the civil sector and encouraging them to participate in climate discussions through the preparation of positional statements on climate action. UNDP will actively work with youth organizations in the three Central Asian states to empower youth to make decisions on climate action negotiations (Timesca.com, 18.12.2020).
- A popular traditional Turkish board game, Mangala, along with Toguzqumalmaq and Toguz Korgool, submitted by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey were added to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The decision was made during the 15th Session of Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage held online. The Foreign Ministry of Turkey praised UNESCO for adding traditional Turkic strategic board games to the list (Trtworld.com, 19.12.2020).
- Minister of Culture of Mongolia, Sampildondov Chuluun, received the Ambassador of Turkey to Mongolia, Ahmet Yazal. The officials discussed the museum project at Sage Tonyukuk complex and exchanged views on further expanding cooperation between the museums, libraries, and theaters of the two countries. The sides also exchanged views on cooperation in preparation of specialists in the field of arts and culture and exchange practices in the future (Montsame.mn, 15.12.2020).
- For the first time, the Cambridge University Publishing House in partnership with the Embassy of Kazakhstan in the UK published a collection of selected works of one of the most prominent Kazakh scientists of the 19th century, Shokan Valikhanov, in English. The event was held in a semi-online format within the walls of the Royal Geographical Society and was attended by the managing director of the Cambridge Education Partnership at the University of Cambridge, Jane Mann, and the Ambassador of Kazakhstan, Yerlan Idrisov (Inform.kz, 17.12.2020).