

The Gagauz Referendum in Moldova: A Russian Political Weapon?

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 11 Issue: 23

February 5, 2014

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Voters cast their ballots in the February 2 referendum in Gagauzia

Referendums are not always simply an instrument of democracy, but can be a manipulative tool of politics. Regardless of regime type, political leaders in the past have invoked the will of the people to legitimize and advance their own political agendas. In Gagauzia, an autonomous region in the south of Moldova, a recent referendum on the country's policy of European integration seems to fit this mold.

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is home to a compactly living and predominantly Russian-speaking Gagauz minority of Turkic descent, which follows the Christian Orthodox faith. The Gagauz ethnic group represents about 4.4 percent of Moldova's total population, but makes up some 80 percent of Gagauzia's inhabitants.

The February 2 referendum was initiated by the autonomy's legislative body, the People's Assembly of Gagauzia (halktoplushu.com, February 1). The plebiscite asked locals to express their preferences between further European integration or closer ties with Russia. A third question inquired whether Gagauzia should seek independence from Moldova, in case the latter lost its sovereignty—such as if Moldova and Romania were merged into a single state.

A question about Moldova joining the Russia-led Custom Union was printed on a green ballot. The one inquiring on European Union integration was printed on red. And finally, the question on Gagauzia's right to secede from Moldova was written on yellow paper (Inprofunzime.md, February 2). The ballots' color scheme seemed to suggest traffic lights colors, with red demanding to “stop,” green signifying “safe” passage, and yellow calling for “caution.”

With a turnout of over 70 percent, the Gagauzian voters overwhelmingly chose membership in the Customs Union over Moldova's entry in the EU—98.4 percent supported joining the Customs Union, and 97.2 percent were against integration with Europe. Moreover, 98.9

percent of voters expressed Gagauzia's right to secede from a no longer independent Moldova (nationalia.info, February 3).

Neither Moldova's nor Gagauzia's legislation appears to allow the autonomous region to hold referendums on national foreign policy. Consequently, a court in Comrat in Gagauzia ruled on January 3 that holding such a plebiscite would be illegal. However, the Gagauz legislative body refused in its February 1 ordinance to accept the court's decision, labeling it politically motivated (halktoplushu.com/index.php/postanovleniya/368-252-sz-v).

The People's Assembly of Gagauzia cast its first vote on conducting the referendum on November 27, 2013, a day before the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. It was at this summit that Moldova initialed its Association Agreement with the European Union (see EDM, December 5, 2013). Russia tried to prevent this from happening by first issuing a warning (see EDM, September 4, 2013), and shortly thereafter banning the import of Moldovan wines (publica.md, September 10, 2013).

Gagauzia was particularly hard hit by these sanctions, given its predominantly agricultural local economy, based heavily on winemaking. The Russian sanctions led to a competition among local politicians as to who could appear most vociferously pro-Russian. In one related instance, the speaker of the Gagauz People's Assembly, Dmitri Constantinov, insisted on September 17, 2013, that Farit Muhametshin, the Russian ambassador to Moldova, "had supported" the idea of a local referendum (Enigagauziya.md, September 17, 2013).

Indeed, the Russian Embassy in Moldova has been very active in working with Moldova's Russian-speaking regions. Among these are Gagauzia, the Taraclia district (populated by 65 percent Russian-speaking ethnic Bulgarians), and the Balti municipality (the third largest city in Moldova after Chisinau and Tiraspol). Earlier this year, Ambassador Muhametshin announced that the Russian Embassy in Moldova is going to show "special interest" in Gagauzia and Taraclia in 2014 (noi.md, January 3).

Given the Comrat court's decision on the referendum's illegality, the central authorities in Chisinau banned the use of public funds to organize such a vote. The funding problem was apparently solved when Russian businessman Yuri Yakubov, who claims to have roots in Gagauzia, offered close to a million Moldovan lei (around \$72,000) for that purpose (ziarulnational.md, January 21).

Even though the portion of the referendum that inquired about preferences between the EU and Russia was of a consultative nature, it still represents a formidable political weapon. Having tested the ground and faced only hesitation from the Moldovan central government, the mastermind behind this political action is likely to incite other Russian-speaking regions

of Moldova to hold similar referendums. Moreover, akin to earlier practice in Transnistria, such referendums can be used to encourage politicians in the Russian-speaking regions of Moldova to create local branches of Russian political parties.

Moscow, on the other hand, could point to such regional referendums and demand that Chisinau listen to the popular will, as Russian State Duma Deputy Roman Khudeakov insisted when interviewed at a Gagauz polling station on the day of the vote (Inprofunzime.md, February 2). Armed with the “popular will” argument, Russia could further explore it in its negotiations with the United States and the EU, claiming that the European integration agenda is being imposed on the Moldovan population by the West.

Exploiting the “popular will” could also take less peaceful forms. Should the Moldovan government use administrative means to prevent other referendums, the already emboldened organizers could attempt to replicate the tactics of the recent Ukrainian protests. Such tactics could include deploying violent groups to attack and provoke the police, barricading the protest venues to avoid being dispersed, and taking over the local administration buildings to show that the central government is weak. Even if Moldova’s government allows the referendums to take place, these, presented as the “popular will,” may become fuel for violent protests to prevent closer ties with EU. The Gagauz referendum and the consequent central authorities’ inactivity may have forced the Moldovan government into a critical stalemate: it could face risky protests if it prevents further referendums, but it may also risk further protests if the government allows such votes on Moldova’s foreign policy orientation to accumulate.

This situation may be the beginning of a qualitatively different phase in what has initially seemed like just another East-versus-West confrontation. Increasingly, the developments in Moldova are taking on the trappings of a proxy war. Such a confrontation may spiral out of control, whereby the administrative centers become the battlefield, the peaceful protests become reconnaissance tactics, businesses with foreign government ties end up funding the protests, democratic liberties become distorted and manipulated to justify lawlessness, and the politically antagonized and manipulated citizens become the enraged soldiers. Unless appropriate preventive measures are taken, the 2009 violent protests in Moldova suggest that this is not an unlikely scenario.