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The Gagauz People in Bessarabia

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POZNAŃ

THE GAGAUZ PEOPLE IN BESSARABIA

The Gagauz People (or *Gagauzians*) are ethnical group of a quite strange origin. The only certain fact is their living on the area of North-Western Bulgaria. Before the transfer of this population on the area of Bessarabia they have lived certainly in Dobrudja¹. However, many Gagauzians did not emigrate and still live on this area. Nevertheless, there is still an open question whether Dobrudja really forms the fatherland of Gagauzians or they simply settled there as an organized ethnical group. The great problem presents lack of important historical sources (first of all the written sources) and at the same time too big and emotional influence of politics. There are many theories considering the emergence of Gagauzians on the stage of history². The most welcomed see the Gagauzians as:

- 1) The descendants of medieval Turkish tribes (Oghuz, Cumans and others)³.
- 2) The descendants of Seldjuk Turks.
- 3) The descendants of Protobulgarians.
- 4) The Turkified Bulgarians.
- 5) The Turkified Greeks.

There are only some of most important directions of scientific investigations. Unfortunately, no theory has the strong base in historical sources. Some theories are simply a kind of intellectual speculations (or even the kind of science fiction). Unfortunately, we can mention the big influence of politics (both nowadays and in

¹ G. Grigorov, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii – nevidimoe prisutstvie*, „Lukomor’â: arheologîâ, etnologîâ, istoriâ Pivnično-Zahidnogo Pričornomor’â”, Odesa 2009, vip. 3, p. 247.

² More on the problem of ethnical origin of Gagauz people: A. Manov, *Potekloto na gagauzite i tehните običaj i nravi*. Čast 1-2, Varna 1938; K. Baev, *Po V’prosa za etnogenezisa na gagauzite*, „Izvestiâ na Arheologičeskoto Družestvo v gr. Varna” 1953, 9, pp. 89-104; E. Boev, *Ne zabludata a l’žata za gagauzite*, Sofiâ 1995; *Etnogenez i ètničeskaâ istoriâ gagauzov. Issledovaniâ i materialy. Vypusk 1*. Kišinev-Etuliâ 2002; H. Güngör, M. Argunşah, *Gagauz Türkleri (Tarih, Dil, Folklor ve Halk Edebiyatı)*, Ankara 2002; V. Mateeva, *Gagauzite – oše edin pogled*, Sofiâ 2006, pp. 23-80; K. Kalčev, *B’lgarskata etničeska obšnost v Besarabiâ (XIX-XX v.). V’znikvane, razvitie, prinos v obšnacionalnite procesi*, Veliko T’rnovo 2009, pp. 133-152.

³ F. Angelî, *Očerki istorii gagauzov – potomkov oguzov (serediâ VIII-načalo XXI vv)*, Kišinev 2007.

history). And so, nothing strange that for the Gagauzians in Bessarabia the only theory is their descentance from the medieval Turkish tribes. On the other hand, the Bulgarian science (and the government circles) presents the theory that the Gagauzians are simply Turkified Bulgarians⁴. The official position of political authorities states that “they do not deny that Gagauzians belong to the Bulgarian nation”⁵. For Gagauzians there are some advantages like the possibility of study on Bulgarian universities or the Bulgarian passport. The Turks present the opinion on Turkic forefather of the Gagauzians. Moreover, the problem of ethnical origin of Gagauzians is even more difficult because even nowadays they identify themselves not only as the Gagauzians but also as the Bulgarians – everywhere except the area of Bessarabia (Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Transcaucasus). And so, there is the problem of double self-identification. In the past in Bessarabia the Gagauzians named the Bulgarians as “*tukans*” which was the negative name. It is interesting that they (in the historical sources of the late 19th century) identified themselves as the true Bulgarians⁶. Nowadays the Gagauzians in Bessarabia (both in Moldavia and in Ukraine) cut off the Bulgarian ethnical origin, what can be presented as the result of their national consciousness and on the other hand the result of a long Soviet propaganda, which tried to create the separate Gagauzian nation (separate from the Bulgarians). And so, the close cultural relations between Bulgarians and Gagauzians could be underestimated. Both the material and spiritual culture of Gagauzians and Bulgarians are quite similar. Their both are of Orthodox Church⁷. Both on Balkan Peninsula and in Bessarabia they are living quite close or even in mixed settlement points⁸. However, in the past both Gagauzians and Bulgarians created the so-called Mahala’s – the parts of village closed for strangers⁹. In the past Gagauzians described their culture as based on the Orthodox faith. And so, they did not differ from their neighbors (Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, Moldavians, Ukrainians and Russians). And so, the main factor differing them from

⁴ Already the great Bulgarian patriot Georgi Rakowski presented the hypothesis that the Gagauzians are Turkified Bulgarians. His opinion was based on the information that after the subjugation of Bulgaria by Osman Turks were murdered both the people of different religious faith but everyone who did not talk in Turkish language. In such the situation, by his opinion, some Bulgarians started talk in Turkish language (K. Kalčev, *B’lgarskata etničeska obšnost...*, p. 136).

⁵ For presenting the official position of Bulgarian state authorities I would like to thank the Bulgarian diplomat Mr Emil Milanov from Sofia.

⁶ G. Grigorov, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii...*, p. 242.

⁷ N. Červenkov, *Sozdanie cerkvej v bolgarskih koloniâh Bessarabii v pervoj polovinie XIX veka*, [in:] *Pravoslavnye hramy v bolgarskih i gagauzskih seleniâh juga Ukrainy i Moldovy. Ūbilejnyj sbornik po slučaiu 170-letiâ so dnâ založenii i 165-letiâ so dnâ osvâšeniâ Bolgradskogo Spaso-Preobraženskogo sobora, 160-letiâ so dnâ postrojki kladbišenskoj cerkvi vo imâ Svâtitelâ Mitrofanâ Voronežskogo v gorode Bolgrade*, Bolgrad 2005, pp. 146-160.

⁸ O.K. Karanastas-Radova, *Gagauzy v sostave zadunajskih pereselencev i ih poseleniâ v Budžake (konec XVIII-pervaâ četvert’ XIX vv)*, Kišinev-Komrat 2001.

⁹ This notion is of Arabic origin, which came to the Balkan Peninsula thanks to the Turkish language and afterwards (together with Bulgarian colonists) came to Bessarabia.

the neighbors is the language¹⁰. The Gagauzian language is one of the Turkic languages, quite close to the Turkish languages as well as to the Azeri and Turkmen languages. It is difficult to believe in the popular theory that the Turkophones of Gagauzians is the result of Osman authorities influence on the Christian population of Balkan Peninsula (if they did not change their faith on Islam they have to accept the Turkish language). Quite the same opinions are presented by the small groups of Christian Turkophones on the other areas¹¹. Such a theory tries to underline the close connection between the given ethnical group and the Christian faith (more specific – Orthodox faith), because the members of given ethnical group wanted to abandon their native language in order to preserve their faith.

Some modern scholars try to distinguish between the Gagauzians and the Bulgarians even in the era of first transfers of Christian population from the Balkan Peninsula to the area of Bessarabia¹². This task is rather difficult and quite risky. As the historical base the analysis of names is presented, where different families are identified as Gagauzian or Bulgarian. However, this method is quite risky because the given name can only suggest the ethnical identification and can not be treated as the certain prove. Moreover, in case of such close interconnected ethnical groups as the Gagauzians and the Bulgarians the question of ethnical identification was quite often the question of a free choice. The best example of a quite similar situation can be the person of well known Orthodox priest Mihail Chakir, who identified himself as the Gagauzian¹³. On the other hand, the other priest of the same family Dmitriy Chakir presented the opinion that the Gagauzians are the Bulgarians – and so, he treated himself as the Bulgarian¹⁴. And so, in spite of many scientific investigations, the question of ethnical origin of the Gagauzians is still a mystery. Quite recently one of Bulgarian researchers tried to put a bridge between some opposite theories. Namely, in the opinion of Grigor Grigorov the Gagauzians in Osman state based entirely on their religious identification. In his opinion their ethnical position was similar to their religious identification. Because during the Osman subjugation Islam formed the dominant religious faith, the Gagauzians thanks to their historical consciousness of belonging to the Bulgarian state (as the Christian state), they started to present themselves as the Bulgarians¹⁵. Such the theory did not say about the descendance of Gagauzians from Bulgarians but tries to answer the mysterious question of the double self-identification of Gagauzians (as the Gagauzian and as the Bulgarian at the same time).

¹⁰ G. Grigorov, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii...*, p. 236.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 255.

¹² O.K. Radova (*Pereselenčeskoe dviženie v XVIII-pervoj polovine XIX vv. Osnovnye ètapy i ihosobnosti*, [in:] *Istoriâ i kul'tura gagauzov*, Komrat-Kišinèu 2006, p. 76.).

¹³ M. Čakir, *Istoriâ gagauzov Besarabii*, [in:] *Stranicy istorii i literatury gagauzov XIX-nač. XX vv.*, Chişinău 2005, pp. 80-108.

¹⁴ G. Grigorov, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii...*, p. 260; idem, *Rodoslovie i nacionalnost pri besarabskata familiâ Čakir*, „Balkanističen Forum” 2008, 1-2, pp. 251-261.

¹⁵ Idem, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii...*, p. 255.

The Gagauzians problems even quite recently was not known to the Polish people, in spite of such the scholars as Tadeusz Kowalski (1889-1948) and Włodzimierz Zajączkowski (1914-1982), who investigated the Gagauzian problems¹⁶.

As it was already mentioned in the beginning of this article the Gagauzians came to Bessarabia (as the part of population's transfers) from the area of the Balkan Peninsula. They came together with members of other nations and ethnical groups – among them the greatest group was formed by the Bulgarians. We do not know the exact reasons of these ethnical transfers. The migration of Bulgarian population began after the Osman aggression. In that time began the movement of population on the second bank of Danube – i.e. on the area of Moldova and Wallachia. Next, some groups of Christian population began to settle on the area of Bessarabia, situated then within the borders of Turkey but the living conditions there were a little better. The pressure of Osman authorities on the subjugated nations on Balkan Peninsula was not the same in every area. In the Western part of Balkan Peninsula and in the mountainous regions this pressure was lesser than on lowlands and in the Eastern part of Balkan Peninsula (it was especially visible in Thrace and in Dobrudja)¹⁷. Similar in Bessarabia the Osman authorities treated the Christian population little better. In the opinion of Grigor Grigorov the most common form of opposition against the Osman authority was the transfer of population to different regions and not the organised revolts¹⁸. As other reasons of migration can be mentioned the overpopulated area and first of all the Turkish bandits on the Balkan Peninsula, especially active against the Christian population. Moreover, quite great and well organised migrations were the result of some Russian-Turkish wars. In 1812 Bessarabia had been joined to Russia. The tsarist Russia was very keen in migration of settlers from the Balkan Peninsula to its new territories – after the removal of Tatars from these areas. The Russian authorities wanted to settle the Orthodox population counting on their loyalty and their fast assimilation. There was big propaganda and many promises of special rights for future colonists. Among them there were first of all the Bulgarians and the Gagauzians. At first the Russian authorities did not differ the Gagauzians and the Bulgarians, treated them as the Bulgarians using the Turkish language. This situation lasted practically up to the end of the 19th century. The greatest migration of Gagauzians from the Balkan Peninsula to Bessarabia took place in the beginning of 19th century (already in 1806-1812 and later). The new settlers settled down first of all in towns (fortresses) such like: Izmail, Kilia, Bendery and also Chisinau. Afterwards they settled down in some villages as well. Some of them were created but in many cases the villages abandoned by Tatars were settled down which can be testified by toponymy. There were also some cases when migrants after living in one of above-mentioned towns created the new village. The

¹⁶ W. Zajączkowski, *Język i folklor Gagauzów z Bułgarii*, Kraków 1966; idem, *Gagauz*, [in:] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. 2, Leiden 1991, pp. 971-972. In this article the author presents also the selective bibliography concerning the Gagauzians.

¹⁷ G. Grigorov, *Gagauzy v Osmanskoj imperii...*, p. 240.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

Gagauzian population settled down first of all in the Southern part of Bessarabia – known as Budjak. And so, the Gagauzians starting with Dobruđja migrated from the Balkan Peninsula to the area between Prut and Dnester. Only a small part of Gagauzians remained on the area of the Balkan Peninsula.

The Gagauzians were of the Orthodox faith. When they came to their new fatherland they built their houses and some other buildings. At first some dugouts were created and afterwards the stable house were built. Quite soon the Orthodox churches were built, or some Gospel Halls at least. These buildings were built of stone¹⁹. The Russian authorities supported these activities counting on fast integration and russification of the Gagauzians and the Bulgarians.

During the 19th century the Gagauzian population in Bessarabia lived within the borders of Russia and the Moldavian Princedom, because in the years of 1856-1877 the Southern part of this region belonged to Moldova but next it returned to Russia. Between the First and Second World Wars the whole Bessarabia was within the borders of the “great Romania”. This period is especially uncertain for the history of Gagauzians because of Soviet ideology. On the one hand, the Romanian authorities were against the national minorities in this state. However, this attitude was not true in all this period but rather for the dictatorship of king Charles II and Ion Antonescu. The different pressures were put not only against the Gagauzians but against all the non-Romanian peoples. During the Second World War the greatest persecutions were against the Jews and Romani people. And so, the Gagauzians, Bulgarians and Jews and members of other nationalities were (more or less openly) in favor of Soviet Union which was supported by the Soviet propaganda. Only the Germans and the Poles presented more loyal attitude towards the Romanian authorities.

In 1940 the Soviet authorities presented to Romania ultimatum, strongly demanding receiving Bessarabia. Romania had to accept these terms. This situation is described in modern Moldavian historiography as “the peaceful solution of the Bessarabian problem”, which is perhaps best to leave without any comment²⁰! The introduction of Bessarabia into Soviet Union is presented even as the liberation, act of democracy. On the other hand very rarely are mentioned in modern Moldavian historiography such the problems as (for instance) forced collectivization of an agriculture, repressions, closing of churches, acts against wealthy farmers etc.²¹ We can say that the living conditions of Gagauzians before the Second World War certainly was not easy but (taking into consideration political situation) there was no other choice. Such the Gagauzians, who escaped to Soviet Union were used in a cynical way. Firstly they obtained some help but they were used to transport an illegal com-

¹⁹ V.A. Moškov, *Gagauzy Benderskogo uezda (Ètnografičeskie očerki i materialy)*, Kišinev 2004, pp. 359-360.

²⁰ P.M. Šornikov, *Šocial'no-političeskoe položenie gaganzov v 20-40gg. XX veka*, [in:] *Istoriâ i kul'tura gagauzov*, p. 317-320.

²¹ Only nowadays we can speak more openly on the Stalinist repressions and some new books emerged like for instance: K. Kurdoglo, *Repressii i masovye deportacii žitelej s. Baurči, Čadyr-Lungskogo r-na Respubliki Moldova 1940-1951 gg.*, Baurči-Kišnëu 2009.

munist newspapers to Bessarabia and afterwards they were victims of Stalin's repressions.

After the Second World War the Gagauzians in Bessarabia became for quite a long time Soviet citizens. In the beginning of a postwar period their situation was simply tragic. In years 1946-1947 due to the bad agricultural production perhaps even 40-60% of Gagauzians in Budjak died of hunger (thanks to the modern estimates). This tragic situation was not mentioned or the natural conditions were blamed for it. Nowadays, it is possible to speak freely about these tragic facts²² and in some villages inhabited by Gagauzians there were constructed some monuments on the cemeteries in commemoration of this hunger (for instance in the village of Beşalma in Moldova and in Kurçu/Kurçi in Ukraine). Just after many years we can say on policy of communist authorities who neglected the crisis or perhaps even deliberately tried to introduce famine – like Stalin who decided to destroy the private ownership in agriculture in order for its collectivization.

However, not only farmers were persecuted in Soviet Union. Especially, religion and its all forms were in great danger. Instead of Orthodox churches (after their closure), the so-called "houses of culture" had been built. Of course these houses did not serve to preserve Gagauzian culture but their main purpose was to create the so-called "soviet man". Some Orthodox churches have been closed already in 1940 (for instance in Kirsovo²³). Others were closed a little bit later. Some of them were changed into warehouses or museums but many remained empty. There were some destroyed. During the existence of Soviet Union functioned only two Orthodox churches on the territory of Gagauzian autonomy (in Kongaz and in Chok Maydan).

In 50th and 60th of the 20th century there was little said on Gagauzians. Nevertheless, in the Southern part of Moldavian SRR there were introduced some lessons in Gagauzian language. The written form of Gagauzian language was based on Cyrillic alphabet. The first publications in Gagauzian had been printed. But soon lessons in schools started to be in Russian language only. When Mikhail Gorbachev started his policy of Pierestrojka and glasnost (some attempts of introducing basic forms of democracy), the Gagauzians began to fight for their rights. Especially, some members of young and well-educated (but in Russian culture) Gagauzian intelligentsia were the spiritus movens. In the Southern part of Moldova the social movement "*Gagauz halki*" emerged. After some time this movement was banned by political authorities, in spite of a big social support. After many demonstrations on August 19, 1990 the Gagauzian Republic emerged, which proclaimed its separation from Moldavian SSR (but declared remaining in Soviet Union)²⁴. At that time started many conflicts between Gagauzia and Chisinau. There was president at the head of Gagauzian republic – Stepan Topal. The authorities in Chisinau sent against the Gagauzians so-called "volunteers". Fortunately, Moscow authorities sent troops

²² Idem, *Golod v Gagauzii (1946-1947 gg.)*, Komrat-Kišinev 2010.

²³ G.S. Stojnov, *Kirsovo: 180 let Baškiüü. Kirsovo v prošlom I nastoâšem*, Kişinev 1990, p. 109.

²⁴ M. Kendigelân, *Gagauzskââ Respublika. Bor'ba gagauzov za nacional'noe samoopredelene. 1989-1995. Vospominaniâ. Dokumenty*, Komrat 2009.

(from the near by town of Bolgrad on Ukraine near the border with Moldova), which established order.

However, Gagauzians could not get a compromise even with authorities of independent Moldova. On December 23, 1994 the region in Southern Moldova, where Gagauzians dominates ethnically, gained the official rights of autonomy. There was established Autonomous Territory Gagauzia *Gagauz Yeri*. This territory is 1832 km² and consists of four parts. The biggest one is the area between the towns of Komrat and Chadir Lunga. The second is the area situated in Southern part of Moldova – the town of Valkaneş and some neighboring villages. The part of *Gagauz Yeri* are also two rural territories: Karbalia oraz Copçak. The capital of Gagauzian Autonomy is the town of Komrat²⁵. The official languages are Russian, Moldavian (the same as Romanian) and Gagauzian – but there are no official documents in Gagauzian language²⁶.

The Gagauzian Autonomy has both its authorities and its symbols. There is a governor who bears the title of Başkan; nowadays this post is in hands of Mihail Formuzal (after the new elections should be on December 12, 2010 elected for the second time on this post). The Gagauzian Autonomy has its local parliament and its own government. The elections are democratic but Chisinau is said to make some pressures. All the ethnical symbols are the same as the ethnical symbols of Moldova. The Gagauzian Autonomy received some parts of administrative rights. The central authorities in Chisinau conduct the foreign policy as well as monetary one. The Gagauzian Autonomy has its representatives (of rather low grade) in many countries, which serve mainly the economic cooperation – for instance, the Gagauzian authorities have cooperation with the region of Zielona Góra in Poland. The territory of Gagauzian Autonomy is divided into three regions and some communities. There are 32 settlements points belonging to Gagauzian Autonomy. The capital of Komrat has the position of *municipium*.

As a kind of conclusion of this article on Gagauzians in Bessarabia I can underline the patch of this ethnical group to its emancipation and some form of state – in the form of autonomy. There are some different attitudes toward the Gagauzian Autonomy. Some fundamentalist-nationalist politicians present the opinion that in reality the Gagauzian Autonomy do not realize any national aspirations of Gagauzians and the important political decisions are made in Chisinau and not in Komrat. On the other hand there are many supporters of autonomy. Against any strange opinions, I can say that Gagauzians in Southern Moldova gained better position than in any other region inhabited by this ethnical group. I can mention the situation in Ukraine. After the introduction of Bessarabia into Soviet Union this areas had been divided into Moldavian SSR (newly established) and Ukrainian SSR. The areas situ-

²⁵ S. Bulgar, *Istoriâ goroda Komrata*, Kişineu 2008.

²⁶ F. Angeli, *Gagauzskajâ Avtonomiâ. Lüdi i fakty (1989-2005 gg.)*, Kişinev 2006; J. Hatlas, *Gagauzja i Gagauzi – historia oraz współczesność*, Poznań 2009; M. Żyromski, J. Hatlas, *Power, administration and ethnic minorities. The case study of Gagauzian Autonomy*, Poznań 2008; *Gagauziya. Moldova Respublikasında Gagauz Yeri Avtonom Bölgesi*, Kişinev-Komrat 2009.

ated both in North and South (practically whole Budjak) were on the side of Ukraine. This situation is still after the collapse of Soviet Union and the establishing of independent Moldova and Ukraine. And so, the modern border divided the area of Gagauzian-Bulgarian settlement into two parts. This border cut not only some municipalities but also some families, gardens or houses. The most part of Gagauzians lives within the borders of Moldova but the most part of Bulgarians lives in Ukraine. The Gagauzians living in Ukraine do not have any special rights and they are treated simply as other ethnical minorities living in this country. They have its own organizations and have some possibilities of preserving its own culture. The similar situation is in Bulgaria, Greece and in other countries where Gagauzians live. And so, in my opinion the Autonomous Territory Gagauzia *Gagauz Yeri* should be valued very positively. Quite small ethnical group of Gagauzians (at about 220.000 in all the world) starts to be world wide known and is analyzed by some scholars. There are also worlds' meetings of Gagauzians, which serve both – popularization of the nation and business purposes. There were two such meetings so far. The second one took place in August of 2009 and I (together with my family) had a honour of taking part in this wonderful and memorable meeting.

In result of ethnic movements (as it was mentioned before) nowadays the greatest settlement of Gagauzians is situated not in Bulgaria but in Southern Moldova²⁷. In Bulgaria they live mainly in the vicinity of towns Varna and Dobrich²⁸.

There is very positive fact that the Gagauzians could organize themselves in their new land – Besarabia. Nowadays, however, there is a significant problem whether they could survive on this area as the separate ethnos (or even nation, as they identify themselves). Nevertheless, the economic problems create the situation that the greatest part of new generations of Gagauzians (mostly well educated) emigrates abroad because they could not find the job. Very often they go to Turkey but only for short period of time (like the German “Gastarbeiter”) but in Russia we can speak on the emigration. There is the significant problem that the Gagauzians in Russia, who speak fluently Russian and who have pro-Russian attitudes, could simply disappear in the local society. On the other hand, only the economic improvement in Moldova could stop the emigration of Gagauzian' younger generation from the territory of *Gagauz Yeri*.

²⁷ The well-known modern scientist Elizaveta Kvilinkova compared the Gagauzians living in these two countries (E.N. Kvilinkova, *Gagauzy Moldovy i Bolgarii*, Chişinău 2005).

²⁸ More on Gagauzians in Bulgaria: *Gagauzite v B'lgariâ. Zapiski ot terena*, Sofiâ 2007. The author of this article visited in June 2011 one of these villages in the vicinity of Varna (General Kantardzhievo).

Streszczenie

GAGAUZI W BESARABII

Gagauzi to etnos zagadkowego pochodzenia. Jedynym pewnikiem historycznym jest ich przebywanie na obszarze północno-wschodniej Bułgarii. Obecnie największe ich skupisko znajduje się w Besarabii. Na południu Mołdawii mają oni namiastkę swej państwowości, jaką jest Terytorium Autonomiczne Gagauzja (*Gagauz Yeri*). Gagauzi mieszkający po drugiej stronie granicy, na obszarze obwodu odeskiego na Ukrainie, nie mają żadnego uprzywilejowanego statusu. Co ciekawe, pomimo że Gagauzi używają języka należącego do grona języków turkijskich, to pod względem religii są prawosławni.