

The Gagauz of Moldava and Ukraine

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The Gagauz are Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christian populations with obvious Balkan cultural and physical characteristics. They start to appear in historical sources only during the period around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire in 3 regions of the Balkan Peninsula: in Dobruja, in Thrace and in Macedonia.



During this period they immigrated in their majority to the southern part of the region of Bessarabia, then passing under the sovereignty of the Russian Empire. These immigrations were mainly a consequence of their participation in the Russian- Turkish wars on the side of their coreligionist Russians. The descendents of the remaining Gagauz, who did not immigrate then from the Balkans, are living today mainly in Greece and Bulgaria.

Many hypotheses have been proposed to explain the existence of the Gagauz. Some of these hypotheses claim them as descendents of native Balkan Orthodox Christians, mainly of Greek or Bulgarian origin, who during the ottoman period adopted gradually the dialects of the Turks who were the majority in their regions. Others claim them as descendents of Turkish- speaking Greeks from Asia Minor who settled in the Balkans. Others yet attempt to correlate them with several nomadic tribes of Turkic origin that passed during the Middle Ages through the Balkans. Finally some consider them to be the descendents of christianized Turks.

The region of Bessarabia remained a part of the Russian Empire until 1918 when it passed under the sovereignty of Romania, while in 1944 it was occupied by the Soviet Union and was transformed to the Moldavian S.S.R, with the exception of its southeaster part that was conceded to the already existing Ukrainian S.S.R. A consequence of this partition was that the 3 small Gagauz towns and 23 of the Gagauz villages, which had been created in the meanwhile, were found within the boundaries of the Moldavian S.S.R., while the rest 7 Gagauz villages within the

boundaries of the Ukrainian S.S.R The soviet authorities recognized the Gagauz as an official soviet nationality and they created in 1957 an alphabet and a grammar for their Turkish idiom, named it as a separate Gagauz language. At the same time the soviet scientific school tried to orientate them historically and culturally towards the family of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Caucas, something that in some degree succeeded. Following 1990 and the breakup of the Soviet Union the Gagauz of Bessarabia found themselves living, as national minorities, within the borders of the now independent Republics of Moldova and Ukraine. Although the Gagauz of Ukraine (-40.000) did not lay claim to any particular political or cultural rights, the Gagauz of Moldova (-180.000) did this and in 1994 succeeded, with the agreement of the Moldovian authorities, in establishing a special regime of autonomy in their territories, thus creating the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia.

This Territory covers an area of 1.800 km² and its local government consists in an eligible local legislative body and an eligible governor who is the head of a local executive body and at the same time is a member of the cabinet of ministers of the Republic of Moldova. The official languages of the A.T. Gagauzia are Gagauzian, still at the first stages of its standardization, Moldavian (Rumanian), with which the inhabitants are not yet familiar to a sufficient degree, and Russian, essentially the basic language of operation for the public services, transactions and education.

Ecclesiastically the Gagauz of Moldova and Ukraine are subordinated, respectively through the Metropolis of Chisinau and the Metropolis of Kiev, to the Patriarchate of Moscow, to which are particularly devoted. In spite of the fact that today they follow the Russian ritual very faithfully, their traditional expression and practices of the orthodox religion, the popular calendar of religious fests and its related customs, the religious terminology of their idiom consisting mainly of Greek words, like in general all the other elements, which compose their traditional culture, clearly indicate their historical connection with the Byzantine heritage of the Balkans. However, this is a connection the awareness of which today in a large degree they have lost. With about these data and lacking in general enough other supplies, the Gagauz of Moldova and Ukraine are today just in the beginning of a process for the development of their culture and language, the comprehension of their origin, the formation of a definite historical and national identity and the discovery of their natural position in the modern global cultural map.

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