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Erdogan's Turkey Alienates Itself from Moldova's Turkic Minority

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March 4, 2021



Moldova, the first former Soviet country to experiment with asymmetrical devolution as a solution to ethnic problems, has faced two secessionist confrontations with territorially concentrated ethnic minorities, ending with ethnic-territorial autonomy in the form of Gagauzia and a frozen conflict with Transnistria. Both continue to constitute highly politicized environments in which external actors heavily engage, often utilizing ethnolinguistic ties to further their aims.

Moldova's only de facto autonomous administration, Gagauzia, unlike the Russia-backed separatist Transnistria, avoided war following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Yet, the region continues to see ethnic mobilization involving external actors at the two ends of the spectrum (the West and the East) with political mobilization involving domestic political actors (pro-Western and pro-Russian).

Gagauzia is primarily populated by the Gagauz people, a Turkic-speaking, Orthodox-Christian, ethnocultural community comprising 84% of the territory's population according to the 2014 Moldovan census. Numbering around 150,000, they are the second largest ethnic minority in Moldova after Ukrainians. The Gagauz peoples' mother tongue is Gagauz, a Turkic language that is mutually intelligible with standard Turkish. However, they also use Russian (either as a first or second language), as opposed to the country's official language, Moldovan (Romanian), in communicating with their compatriots.

The conflict between de facto neighbor Russia and neighboring Ukraine in February 2014 led to a sharpening of the already existent polarization in Moldovan society. While the two hostile pro-Western and pro-Russian camps arose in Moldova, polarized ethnic minorities

became more vulnerable to penetration by external actors. The autonomous territory is squeezed between its two quasi-kin-states: **Turkey**, which fully backs Moldova's territorial integrity and restricts its kin-state activism with the Gagauz along the lines of autonomy, education, and culture, and **Russia**, which is ready to dismantle the fragile regional status quo.

Initially, a NATO member and an EU candidate Turkey's presence as a cultural kin-state was seen as a safety valve to Russia's political presence as an expansionist external actor, but the situation is different today. As Turkey and Russia compete for influence in the only de facto autonomous region of Moldova, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent foreign policy choices have widened Russia's room for maneuver throughout the whole of Moldova.

Laboratory of Authoritarianism



As may be remembered, Gagauzia's autonomous administration held an unconstitutional referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU in February 2014 even though Gagauzia is an ethnofederal entity that does not have the right to legislate on foreign policy. This move came just before Russia's forcible annexation of the autonomous Ukrainian region of Crimea, where the largely ethnic-Russian population voted to secede from Ukraine during the political conflict waged between the pro-Western interim government in Kyiv and the pro-Russian opposition in March 2014.

With a record 70% voter turnout, 97.2% voted against EU accession, and 98.9% of voters supported Gagauzia's right to declare independence if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty. Russia will continue to maintain its political presence in the region, but Turkey, with its current actor-oriented regional approach, is unlikely to remain a useful balance to Russia's presence.

Nonetheless, this could change if Ankara strengthens Turkic identity in Gagauzia, maintains its strict denouncement of the illegal annexation of Crimea as an infringement of both Ukrainian and Moldovan sovereignty, and removes itself from Moldova's internal politics. Although Erdogan sees Gagauzia as a useful tool for his authoritarian expansionism and likes the possibility of Gagauz separatism, today the country lacks the post-Soviet conjuncture of the 1990s that led to greater Gagauz secessionism.

Previously, Turkey and Russia were considered to be on a collision course in Moldova as language was a common factor for both countries' "near abroad". Turkey's definition of kin abroad was long based on ethno-linguistic understandings, but this has shifted to ethno-religious conceptualizations in line with the new Islamist foreign policy pursued by Erdogan. Erdogan's Turkey still uses the credit of then-secular Turkey's progressive kin-state policies, witnessed in his building of the "Recep Tayyip Erdogan Education Complex" in the Gagauz capital of Comrat for example.

Nonetheless, Erdogan and Putin approached Moldova similarly, when, under the rule of pro-Russian ex-president Igor Dodon, they viewed the country as a laboratory of authoritarianism. During this time, Erdogan and Putin's visits to the country were nothing more than exchanges of experiences between two authoritarian leaders. This approach drowned Turkey's state of mind with respect to kin-state activism in Gagauzia, but Russia continued to politicize language to exploit the territory.

Erdogan's ambitions have turned Turkey into an external actor who acts in concert with Russia, as opposed to a reliable partner for Moldova. Such is apparent when observing Turkey's adoption of security policies independent of NATO, as seen in its purchase of Russian S-400s, and its pursuit of a foreign policy that is heavily actor-oriented with a strong preference for authoritarian leaders. Gagauz Governor (*Bashkan*) Irina Vlah's affiliation with Dodon and her close relations with Moscow also influence the playing field.

Erdogan's gift to the Moldovan government of two anti-riot armored vehicles was quite symbolic. Putin's gift to Dodon of a 1790 map of historic Moldova, before it was incorporated into Romania, also speaks volumes. Erdogan's preference for signing agreements related to Moldova's internal security on every visit in combination with his close relationship with pro-Russian autocrat Dodon also indicate Turkey's willingness to actively stoke polarization, especially as it relates to Moldova's domestic security. Today, the Western democrats of Moldova see two foreign actors engaged within its borders, one physically expansionist and the other ideologically expansionist.

Post-Dodon Transition



Three months ago, Dodon lost the presidential election to pro-European Maia Sandu. Now, neither Erdogan nor Putin have a proxy in power to do their bidding. It seems that the old adage, “*öküz öldü ortaklık bozuldu*”, or “now that the thing that held them together is no more, they have parted company”, holds true. But one must remember that the territory traditionally votes for pro-Russian parties and politicians. Indeed, Dodon’s share of the vote from Gagauzia only decreased from 99% in the second round of the presidential elections in 2016, compared to 52% countrywide, to 95% in the recent November elections, compared to 42% countrywide. Russia stands ready to abuse Gagauzia’s economic-driven goodwill as the majority of the Gagauz people have at least one family member who works in Russia.

In this context, Dodon’s so-called “Russian law” can be seen as a parting gift to Russian-speaking minorities and Russia, stipulating that Russian was to be granted a special status as the “language of interethnic communication”, and thereby, to become mandatory for all civil servants. That plan is until Moldova’s Constitutional Court ruled the law unconstitutional.

Turkey’s traditional backing of Moldovan territorial integrity and its kin-state activism in the fields of autonomy, education, and culture can actually be used for good in helping newly-elected president Sandu to balance integrity and identity. To do so, Turkey can prevent the Gagauz from being seen as a threat to Moldova while simultaneously working against Russian exploitation of Gagauzia to achieve its aims. This can be done by strengthening Gagauz’s Turkic identity, which already constitutes the backbone of the asymmetrical autonomy. Without being seen as supportive of Russia’s policy against a democratic government in Chisinau, Ankara can leverage its role as a cultural actor for greater balance.

Gagauzia’s preservation of the Gagauz ethno-culture, including the Turkic language and the provisions of cultural federalism which constituted the basis for territorial autonomy, seem to have come under fire as Russia comes to see Gagauzia as a useful tool to intervene in Moldova.

As Turkey moves away from the West and prioritizes ethno-religious over ethno-linguistic ties with its “near abroad” under Erdogan, it will continue to remain isolated even in regions populated by its kin. This approach also entrusts the region to Russia until the next autocrat comes to power. It turns out that Moldova is no longer synonymous with Dodon, and now is the time to see that Turkey’s foreign policy towards its kin abroad can also be decoupled from Erdogan’s personal ambitions.

Abdullah Sencer Gozubenli is a doctoral research fellow at Abo Akademi University in Finland and editor-in-chief of the Adriatic Report. Gozubenli focuses on the Balkans, minorities, and transnational identity politics. He can be found on Twitter, @sencereu.