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Moldova: in search of its own place in Europe

Edited by Natalia Cwicinskaja and Piotr Oleksy

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The Bulgarian minority in Taraclia District and the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) and its official position in the Republic of Moldova

Abstract

On the territory of Republic of Moldova, Bulgarians live mostly in the southern part of the country. On 30 March 1992, the President of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, signed the law "on some measures connected with the development of Bulgarian national culture." On 23 June 1992 in response to this law Valeriu Muravschi—the prime minister of the Republic of Moldova at the time—signed government declaration no. 428 "On the development of national culture of Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova." The Taraclia District (raionul Taraclia) is an administrative-territorial unit situated on the south of the Republic of Moldova. Bulgarians form more than a half (66 per cent) of the population of this region. The town of Taraclia as the administrative centre of Taraclia District has about 15,000 inhabitants, with Bulgarians as three-quarters of them. Bulgarians form the biggest majority of the population in such localities as: Albota de Jos, Albota de Sus, Cairaclia, Corten, Cortenul Nou, Novosiolovca, Tvardița (Tvarditsa) and Valea Perjei. And thus, Bulgarians form the majority in only 9 out of 26 localities which make up Taraclia District. Gagauzia is an autonomous region of Moldova. As it has already been mentioned, Bulgarians have no more rights than some members of other ethnic minorities which live on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

Both Bulgarians and Gagauzians (the Gagauz people) live mostly in the southern part of the territory of the Republic of Moldova.¹ They all have citizenship of the same state, but in some details their legal situation is different (sometimes even to a considerable degree). After many protests and the declaration of secession in 1990, the Gagauzians gained quite a favourable position (Кендигелян 2009). On 23 December 1994 “The Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri)” was established in places most densely populated by Gagauzians. The Gagauzian Autonomy has its own leader in the name of a baskan (*başkan*), its own local parliament, as well as its own government. Nevertheless, the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) is not made up of any consistent territory (Żyromski, Hałas: 2008, 70). It is divided into four parts. The thorough presentation of the Gagauzian Autonomy within the Republic of Moldova, however, is not within scope of this article.

The legal situation of Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova in the region is quite a different matter. After some attempts of creating one autonomous region together with the Gagauzians (which failed), the Bulgarians did not get any significant concessions from the central authorities in Chişinău. They are simply treated in the same way as many other national and ethnic minorities on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. On 30 March 1992, the President of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, signed the law “on some measures connected

¹ As a result of the great migrations of population which took place in the first half of the 19th century in the territory of Bessarabia (mainly in the south in the so-called Budjak) many colonists from the Balkan Peninsula settled. The greatest group formed the so-called “Bulgarian colonists.” This was a mixed population which comprised of two *ethnos*: Bulgarians and Gagauzians. Even today, their descendants live in two countries which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union: the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Nowadays, there is a dense Bulgarian-Gagauzian settlement in Southern Moldova and in the Western part of the Odessa Oblast in Ukraine. Such was the result of the division of Bessarabia by Soviet authorities between the Moldavian and Ukrainian SSR. Some territories in the north (the town of Hotim with its vicinities) and the whole of the southern part of Bessarabia were included into Ukraine. Thus, the border between the two Soviet republics was made in spite of the territory of the consistent Bulgarian-Gagauzian settlement; this border divided not only some villages but even some houses, gardens, fields and first of all, the native population (even some families). In such a situation, most of the Bulgarians were in Ukraine, and the most of the Gagauzians in Southern Moldova. Nevertheless, during the time of the Soviet Union this border only served administrative purposes. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of independent states (such as the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), this border became the state border. The Bulgarians are concentrated in some places, such as: the Taraclia District, Chişinău and Parkany (on the territory of the mutinous so-called PMR—*Pridniestrowskaja Moldawskaia Rjespublika*). (Грек, Червенков 1993, Калчев 2009.)

with the development of Bulgarian national culture” (*В лабиринтах*: 85–86). This document embraced the help of the government and gave some concessions to the Bulgarian minority. A large impact was put on the education of Bulgarian children and youth in their native language, as well as on cooperation with Bulgaria in executing this task. With respect to the development of Bulgarian culture, there was a declaration of help to the already existing organisation of “Revival,” as well as to some other Bulgarian organisations active in culture and education. There were also recommendations for the government to create a separate administrative-territorial unit in places of any consistent Bulgarian settlement.

On 23 June 1992, in response to this law, Valeriu Muravschi—the prime minister of the Republic of Moldova at the time—signed government declaration no. 428 “On the development of national culture of Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova” (*ibid.*: 87–90). In this document, some authorities—for instance, various ministers (beginning with the ministry of education), the Academy of Science, the mass media and so on—were obliged to create favourable conditions for the unlimited development of Bulgarian culture on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, in places of dense Bulgarian settlement (the southern part of the country and the capital, Chişinău). This declaration comprised of 12 points. Point ten even recommended that some Bulgarian cultural and education organisations be exempt from paying taxes to the local administration for a period of five years. However, by 16 November 1992, this point ceased to exist.

At first sight, the introduction of the above-mentioned law which acts to create favourable conditions for the development of Bulgarian culture in Moldova, and for the teaching of the Bulgarian language (as well as for the education of Bulgarian children and youth in their native language), seems to be a great achievement. It appears that Bulgarians have achieved an even better status than some of the other national and ethnic minorities in Moldova. Nevertheless, similar laws had already been passed with respect to other national minorities in the state. In the case of the Ukrainian minority, this took place in 1991, during the existence of the Moldavian SSR (*ibid.*: 74-77), in the case of the Russian minority, it happened in the summer of 1991 (*ibid.*: 77-80), and in the case of the Jews, it also happened in 1991 (*ibid.*: 80–85). And so, Bulgarians only took fourth place in the chronology of obtaining minority rights in the Republic of Moldova.

The only achievement of the Bulgarians in Moldova consists of the fact that in places of dense population in south Moldova they live in one administrative unit (Taraclia District).

The Taraclia District (raionul Taraclia) is an administrative-territorial unit situated in the south of the Republic of Moldova (it was created between 1940–1963, and from 1980 until today). The characteristic feature of this area (an area of 674 km²) is that as well as the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), there is a second region of Moldova dominated by people other than Moldovans. Gagauzia, however, is populated mostly by Gagauzians whereas the Taraclia District is mainly populated by Bulgarians. The Bulgarians form more than half (66 per cent) of the population of this region, which was created as a result of the administrative reform of 2003 when the country was divided into administrative units (called regions), similar to during Soviet times.

The Taraclia District was not created with one consistent area. This district embraced territory in the vicinity of the town of Taraclia and the enclave near Tsarist. The “capital” of this district is the town of Taraclia. The Taraclia District borders the Cahul District and the Gagauzian Autonomy, and in the south and south-east, the district border is tantamount to the modern state border between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. There are 26 points of settlement in the Taraclia District. Nevertheless, only one of them (Taraclia) has the status of a town. The remaining 25 have the official position of being villages. Although, we have to bear in mind that many localities in Bugeac have many inhabitants, sometimes even a few thousand people. The villages in the Taraclia District are listed below; some localities rural in character create a community consisting of one or more villages. The table below presents some localities which belong to the Taraclia District.

The town of Taraclia as the administrative centre of the Taraclia District has about 15,000 inhabitants, with three-quarters of them being Bulgarians (Неделчев 1998). However, in some other localities of this area, Bulgarians are not regularly distributed. The Bulgarians form the largest majority of the population in such localities as: Albota de Jos, Albota de Sus, Cairaclia, Corten, Cortenul Nou, Novosiolovca, Tvardița (Tvarditsa) and Valea Perjei. And thus, Bulgarians form the majority in only nine out of 26 localities which makes up the Taraclia District. Bulgarians also live in other localities of this administrative

Table 1. Localities (rural in character) in the Taraclia District

No.	Community	The villages embraced by each community
1	Albota de Jos (Долна Албата; Нижняя Албота)	a) Hagichioi (Хаджикьой, Хаджикей) b) Hîrtop (Хъртоп Хыртоп)
2	Albota de Sus (Горна Албата, Верхняя Албота)	a) Roșița (Рошица, Рошица) b) Sofievca (Софиевка, Софиевка)
3	Aluatu (Алуату, Алуату)	
4	Balabanu (Балабану, Балабану)	
5	Budăi (Будей, Будэй)	a) Dermengi (Дерменджи, Дерменджи)
6	Cairaclia (Кайраклия, Кайраклия)	
7	Sealîc (Чалик, Чалык)	a) Samurza (Самурза, Самурза) b) Cortenul Nou (Нови Кортен, Новый Кортен)
8	Corten (Кортен, Кортен)	
9	Musaitu (Мусайту, Мусайту)	
10	Novosiolovca (Новоселовка, Новоселовка)	
11	Tvardița (Твърдица, Твардица)*	
12	Valea Perjei (Валя Пержей, Валя Пержей)	
13.	Vinogradovca (Виноградовка, Виноградовка)	a) Chirilovca (Кириловка, Кириловка) b) Ciunai (Чумай, Чумай) c) Mirnoe (Мирное, Мирное)
14	Salcia (Салчия, Салчия)	Orehovca (Ореховка, Ореховка)

* Information on March 23, 2013.

ЗАКОН Nr. 764 от 27.12.2001; об административно-территориальном устройстве Республики Молдова Опубликован: 29.01.2002 в Monitorul Oficial Nr. 16 (<http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=312874&lang=2>)

unit but their number is not so significant. As well as Bulgarians in the Taraclia District, there are also Moldovans, Ukrainians, Russians and Gagauzians. The Gagauzians form the most numerous ethnic group in four localities (Cealîc, Mirnoe, Salcia and Sofievca).

In some localities belonging to the Taraclia District both children and youth of Bulgarian origin are taught some lessons in their native language. There is Taraclian State University in Taraclia itself (a *de facto* Bulgarian university), the “Saints Cyril and Methodius” Pedagogical College (which doesn’t exist today) (Дериволков 2002), the “Ivan Vazov” Higher Secondary School, and three secondary schools (no. 1, 2 and 3). There are also the “House of Children Activities,” the “Bulgarian Lower Secondary School” in Tvardița and the “Stefan Neagre” Musical College—the branch in Tvardița. In addition, there are also some schools which use the Bulgarian language in such localities as: Albota de Sus, Cairaclia and Corten. Moreover, there are lower secondary schools in Albota de Jos and Tvardița.

On 6 December 2008 in the town of Taraclia “The Bulgarian Association ‘Rodoljubec’ in the Republic of Moldova” was established. This association was officially registered on 22 January 2009, and began its activities. The main aim of this organisation is to create the best conditions for the revival, development and propagation of Bulgarian spiritual, linguistic, historical, and cultural values. The organisation also tries to create good connections with the country of the region’s ancestors—Bulgaria. The Bulgarian minority has its own library in the town of Taraclia (Narodno čitalishte “Olimpij Panov”). In both Taraclia and Tvardița, mass at some Christian Orthodox churches is also performed in the Bulgarian language, and local Bulgarians use a local dialect of Bulgarian. From observations made by the author, it appears that the language of their ancestors functions a little better in Tvardița than it does in Taraclia. In some towns and especially on the streets amongst the younger generation, the most popular language is Russian, and Bulgarian is only really used at home.² It might appear that some Bulgarians who live in the Taraclia District feel content. However, this is not so. The level of unemployment is high in this region and many people have migrated abroad in order to get a job. In addition, there is a very low birth rate and the population in this district is systematically (but slowly) diminishing. Moreover, some of the members of the central authorities in Chișinău are trying to introduce so-called “optimalisation.” Some members of the Taraclia District are concerned about the closure of some schools which use Bulgarian. Radicalisation of the population in the southern part of the

² And also some members of other nationalities, although in insignificant numbers.

Republic of Moldova can also be observed, which can be illustrated, for instance, by the outcome of the 2011 elections in the town of Taraclia, won by Sergej Filipov (representing the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova) who gained at about 65 per cent of the votes and became the *primar*. In the district council, Filipov's political party gained 19 out of 27 posts, and 18 out of 23 posts in the town council.

Moreover, in the Taraclia District there are some attempts at becoming unified with Gagauzia. This idea first emerged amongst some of the inhabitants of Tvardița. During his stay in this locality in 2010, the author heard of such an option. An older woman pointed out that there was no sense in travelling to an office or a doctor 40 km from Taraclia as the distance to Ceadâr Lunga is only at about 12 km.³ The idea currently exists in the Republic of Moldova of splitting the administration into administrative districts which used to exist between 1999–2002. The former head of the Taraclia District, Kiril Darmanchev, does not exclude the idea of unification of Taraclia District with the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri). Thus, the central authorities in Chișinău have been accused of steadily destroying Taraclia District. In addition, some important offices and public services have been transferred to the town of Cahul, such as the labour inspection and the emergency services (Vesti 2012a: 3).

On 24 May 2012 (the day of Cyril and Methodius, the feast of Slavonic literature), a discussion on lessons in the Bulgarian language took place in the Taraclia District, firstly in the case of children from some localities where there is no density of Bulgarian population, although there are some Bulgarian regions nearby. In such localities, children have some lessons at lower secondary schools in the Moldovan (Romanian) or Russian language (Vesti 2012b: 7).

Nevertheless, Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova have never had any radical complaints. They have not tried to create a political party which could represent their ethnic interests. On the other hand,

³ In 2010 the author of this article intentionally asked the inhabitants of the town of Taraclia some questions in Bulgarian in order to establish their level of understanding of the Bulgarian language. However, no one answered in this language! Everyone asked for the same question in Russian. Apart from members of the university, the only person who used Bulgarian quite well was the local beer drinker near the bus station. Even at Taraclia University some scientists (even in their personal contacts) used Russian, which was very strange for this author. Nevertheless, a longer visit in June 2012 helped to verify some earlier observations. Namely, a significant part of the inhabitants of Taraclia understand the native language of their ancestors and can fluently speak this language (of course in the local form), although they would rather use Russian in public places.

Gagauzians act in the opposite way. In February 2011 information that the social movement One Gagauzia (Edinaya Gagauzia) would be transformed into the political party New Budjak (Noviy Budzhak) was released. The two main objectives of this political party would be the defence of Gagauzian and Bulgarian interests in Moldova, and the position of the official language of Russian in the Republic of Moldova (Vesti 2011: 5).

Bulgarians also live on the territory of the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri). However, amongst 32 settlement points belonging to Gagauz Yeri, only in one locality do Bulgarians form a slight majority. There is the village of Chirsovo situated south of Comrat which is dominated ethnically at a rate of almost 1:1 by Bulgarians and Gagauzians. There are also some Bulgarians living in the districts of Cahul and Cantemir in the southern part of Moldova.

In the capital of the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) some local Bulgarians have united into an organisation known as the Commonwealth of Bulgarians in the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Obština na b'lgarite v ATO Gagauzija), which functions in Comrat. The organisation emerged in 1994 but was officially registered in 2009. The head is Tatjana Rakovchena. The organisation collects and renders accessible some literature in Bulgarian and also organises competitions and excursions to Bulgaria.⁴ In the town of *Vulcănești* in the southern part of Gagauzia there is the organisation "Social Unity of Bulgarians in Vulkanești Region 'Revival'."

In some higher secondary schools in various localities in the territory of the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), there is the possibility to learn Bulgarian. Moreover, in the State University in Comrat, Bulgarian philology has functioned as a subject for quite a long time. Unfortunately, there has not been a huge interest in the humanities recently. In addition, when the university was established in Taraclia (Bulgarian, in fact), the interest in Comrat for Bulgarian philology diminished sharply. Nowadays, the process of closing down Bulgarian philology in Comrat is taking place.

In conclusion, we can say that Bulgarians living in the Taraclia District and in Gagauzia (about 5 per cent of the population of the autonomy) forms the main part of this *ethnos* living in the Republic of Moldova. There are some territorial units that form part of the stable

⁴ As the argument in favour of such a solution, she pointed out that Bulgarians also have very good relations with Gagauzians and so they could very easily join the ATO Gagauzia.

Bulgarian-Gagauzian settlement in Bugeac. The rest are in Ukraine. On the other hand, in Chişinău there are boards of some Bulgarian organisations which function throughout the whole area of Moldova.⁵ As has already been mentioned, Bulgarians have no more rights than some members of other ethnic minorities which live on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, with the exception of Gagauzians who have had a substitute of their own state in the form of autonomy.

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⁵ The author obtained some basic information on this organisation from Tatjana Rakovchena on 10 June 2010.