

The Gagauz Between Christianity and Turkishness

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The Gagauz are a small Turkish community with probably not more than 300,000 members, living mainly in the Balkans. The main group of about 200,000 members lives on the territory of the former Soviet Union; according to the 1989 census roughly 150,000 Gagauz live in the Republic of Moldova and about 31,000 in the neighboring regions of the Ukraine. The second biggest group lives in Bulgaria, but their number is uncertain. Different authors have estimated between 30,000 and 300,000 Gagauz in Bulgaria. According to a 1992 Bulgarian census, they number 1478, only 402 of whom have Gagauz as their mother tongue. This surprisingly low number can be explained by the fact that the Gagauz language is rapidly being given up due to the way the Gagauz in Bulgaria conceive of their ethnic identity. I will go into the details of this self-conception below.

Although small groups of Gagauz are living in Greece, Romania, Turkey, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus and even South America, I will concentrate in what follows on the two main groups: the Gagauz in the Republic of Moldova and the Ukraine and the Gagauz of Bulgaria.

What makes the Gagauz different from the other Turkish groups in the Balkan countries is the fact that they are Orthodox Christians. Closely connected with their faith is the question of their ethnogenesis. There is no consensus among researchers about the origin of the Gagauz. And what is even more important is that the two main groups of Gagauz adhere to two completely different theses about their ancestors and thus their history. In view of the fact that the Gagauz living on the territory of the former Soviet Union migrated there from Bulgaria only about 200 years ago, the different opinions about their history and, connected with this, their ethnic identity, need to be explained.

In outlining the different theses of historians about the Gagauz ethnogenesis, I restrict myself to the major points that are of importance for the Gagauz in the re-making of their history: Basically, the various theses brought forth by historians can be divided into two main branches, one claiming a Turkic origin and the other a non-Turkic one, either Greek or Slavic, i.e. Bulgarian.

The Turkic thesis has two main subgroups: One that claims that the Gagauz are descendents of Pechenegs and Kumans who migrated from the north into Bulgaria where they mingled with Oghuz Turks. This thesis could explain their Christian faith, but it should be noted that there are no traces of a Kipchak origin in the Gagauz language, which is purely Western Oghuz and has been classified as a Turkish dialect (Doerfer 1959 and Doerfer 1965).

The other one claims a purely Oghuz origin, positing that a group of Seljuk Turks from Anatolia migrated in the 13th century to the Byzantine Empire,

adopted Christianity and were settled by the Byzantine Emperor in Dobruja, which is today part of Bulgaria and Romania.

The non-Turkic thesis claims that the Gagauz were simply Bulgarians or Greeks who supposedly changed their language in order to avoid pressure from the Ottoman authorities. Supporting this thesis are mostly anthropological arguments and the fact that the Gagauz language shows – mainly syntactic – similarities with Slavic languages. Its proponents are mainly researchers from the respective countries, i.e. Bulgaria and Greece.¹

It is difficult or even impossible to decide about the various theses because of the sparse historiography. A group with the ethnonym Gagauz was first mentioned in sources when a large group migrated to Bessarabia after the Russian-Turkish war of 1806-1812 (Radova 1995: 268). Before that time nothing of their history is certain. This leaves room for all kinds of speculations and constructions concerning their ethnogenesis.

Yet another problem is the very ethnonym Gagauz. There have been various attempts to establish a Turkic etymology of the word Gagauz, all of which suffer from various shortcomings with regard to language history. Without going into the details of the various etymological attempts, it can be said that what they all have in common is that they try to connect the ethnonym Gagauz with the Turkic tribal name *Oghuz* (Güngör & Argunşah 1991: 4-7 and Pokrovskaya 1996). I should like to emphasize, however, that all these attempts ignore the fact that two early anthropological works on the Gagauz in Bulgaria, Pees 1894 and Jireček 1891, state that the term Gagauz is not a self-designation, but one used only by their Bulgarian and Greek neighbors. The Gagauz themselves felt, according to these works, offended by this designation and referred to themselves either, according to their religion, as Greeks or, connected with the then rising nationalism, as Bulgarians.

I have conducted two linguistic fieldwork projects on the Gagauz language: one in 1993 in Bulgaria and one in 1995 in the Republic of Moldova. Most strikingly, when speaking with members of the respective groups about their history and self-perception as a group different from the majority in their countries was that all Gagauz in Bulgaria described themselves as “pure Bulgarians”, *temiz Bulgar* in Gagauz, whereas the Gagauz in Moldova claimed a Turkic descent.

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In Bulgaria every one of the few Gagauz I spoke to emphasized the fact that the Gagauz were of Bulgarian descent. They uniformly explained the fact that the Gagauz spoke Turkish with their wish to keep their faith under the pressure of Ottoman rule. They referred to the Pomaks, who acted the other way round and converted to Islam. I heard many stories about young girls who had thrown

¹ For a detailed discussion of the various theses see Özkan 1996: 10ff.

themselves into the Black Sea to avoid a forced marriage to an Ottoman nobleman or rape by Ottoman soldiers. This seems to be a common theme among the various ethnic groups from the region and is still vivid also among those who migrated to Moldova. During my fieldwork in Moldova a Gagauz painter gave me a small booklet that contained a ballad about a girl who threw herself into the Danube to escape her Ottoman abductors. Her last words are: “Instead of becoming a servant to the Turks, it is better to become a meal for the fish.”²

One explanation for this rejection of Turkishness is of course the very rigid ethnic policy, to say the least, of the Bulgarian government from the 1960s on that reached its peak in 1984-85. This policy, which aimed at building a single-nation state by assimilating all and especially the Muslim minorities, led even to a complete denial of the existence of a Turkish minority in Bulgaria. All Muslims of Bulgaria accordingly were understood to be Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted to Islam during the Ottoman period (see Eminov 1997). Such a rigid ethnic policy that included discrimination regarding job opportunities, language usage, etc. made it much more attractive for a Christian minority to explain their diversity as a result of external forces. It should be noted, however, that as early as 1891 Jireček noticed that the Gagauz tended to register as Greeks or Bulgarians in the national census. That points to the fact that religion is the main factor for the Gagauz of Bulgaria in selecting their ethnic or in this case even national identity. On the other hand, we can see in the materials from Bulgaria published by Zajączkowski 1966 that as late as the 1960s the Gagauz at least knew and maybe even sang folk songs whose theme was the Ottoman struggle against Russia for dominance on the Balkans. Similar songs are also given in Moškov 1904 and Manov 1938. This indicates that the strong rejection of Turkishness among the Gagauz of Bulgaria is indeed an outcome of the recent Bulgarian nationalist policies.

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In Moldova the situation is different, as I mentioned above. The Gagauz settlement of the southern part of Moldova and the Ukraine goes back to the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. The Russian Empire invited Christian settlers from Bulgaria, especially after the Ottoman-Russian war of 1806-1812, to settle on this fertile soil and fill the gap that occurred with the forced exile of the Tatars who had formerly lived in this region. The Gagauz were a relatively privileged group in the Russian Empire, enjoying exemption from taxes and military service (see Troebst 1999).

² The ballad was given in a Moldovan, a Gagauz and a Bulgarian version together with a Russian translation. The different subtitles: “Moldovan folk ballad”, “Gagauz folk ballad”, and “Bulgarian folk ballad” exemplify that the same theme was common in the folk literature of these three ethnic groups. The booklet was published in 1988 (Ryvkina 1988) under the title *Dunajskaja ballada* [Danubian ballad].

Under Romanian rule, however, between 1866 and 1878 and especially after 1918 they were pressed to assimilate and partly forced to settle into Romania proper. They had to perform military service where they were forced to speak Romanian. Efforts were made to teach Romanian also in the villages. One result of this is the dictionary compiled by the Gagauz priest Mihail Ciachir published in 1938.

In 1944 Moldova finally fell to the Soviet Union and Sovietization might well have fostered the already anti-Romanian feelings. In 1957 came the official recognition of Gagauz as one of the languages of the Soviet Union and the introduction of a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Despite the fact that the Gagauz language and Turkish are linguistically closely related, Soviet researchers stressed an assumed Kipchak layer in the Gagauz language, probably to emphasize a distance between Gagauz and Turkish. Between 1960 and 1962 Gagauz language instruction was given in schools with Gagauz pupils. This was abolished in 1962 allegedly because parents preferred a monolingual Russian education. Nevertheless the Soviet-wide censuses of 1974 and 1989 indicate that the Gagauz tended to stick to their native tongue more closely than other minorities of the Soviet Union.³ As a written language, however, it was only used in a supplement of a newspaper and some literary works, mainly folk poetry, after 1962.

With Perestroika and Glasnost came a radicalization of the Romanian majority against the Soviet government on the one hand and the possibility for the Gagauz to articulate their demands for greater cultural autonomy on the other. When the Romanian Popular Front started their separatist policy, leading to the language law of 1989 that declared Romanian the sole official language, introduced the Latin script and aimed at a reunion with Romania proper, the Gagauz became more radical and began to strive for territorial independence. Alongside with or even caused by this differentiation from and rejection by the Moldovans – in 1990 the Moldovan parliament declared the Gagauz an ethnic minority whose homeland is Bulgaria – the Gagauz started a search for their history and put forward a claim of being a nation (*narod/balk*) (Demirdirek 1996). Another outcome of this policy was the strengthening of the Gagauz language. I will not go into the political struggle which led to the establishment of an autonomous region, *Gagauz Yeri*, in 1994 (Troebst 1999). Rather I shall focus on the major factors for the Gagauz in selecting their national identity, or, to be precise, in arguing for constituting a nation instead of an ethnic minority.

First, I would like to stress that according to my observations the questions surrounding Gagauz identity, history, and ethnogenesis are mainly of interest to

³ A comparison of the 1974 and 1989 census results concerning the Gagauz is given in Fane 1993; the results of the 1989 census can be found in a database on the ethnic minorities of Russia constructed by the Center for Russian Studies at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs, accessible on the Internet: <http://www.nupi.no/RUSSLAND/DATABASE/start.htm>

a group of urban intellectuals. Most Gagauz villagers are more or less unaffected by a search for an independent Gagauz identity. For them, however, it was crucial that Romanian not become the only official language of the Republic of Moldova because only 4% of all Gagauz know Romanian, and that reunification with Romania proper not take place because of the negative image of Romania stemming from the past. Additionally, the daily struggle in a declining economy takes much of their energy. Most villagers I talked to were nostalgic about Soviet times, surely because they were economically much better off then. Freedom of travel, for example, is not that important when you cannot afford to buy fuel, as one villager explained to me. The idea of an independent Gagauz state was dismissed by most simply for pragmatic reasons. They did not feel close to Turks from Turkey mainly because Turks are Muslims while they are Christians. Secondly, they did not feel close to Turks because all the Turks they had ever seen were businessmen while they were farmers. As one man told me: “They don’t earn their money by the sweat of their brows”.

Villagers therefore felt not “Turkish” but simply Gagauz. They differed from the Moldovan majority in language, partly in custom and in their political and economic interests. Religion thus served to distinguish the Gagauz from the Turks of Turkey but was not strong enough to displace Gagauz identity in favor of Moldovan identity in the post-Soviet period.

The intellectuals on the other hand felt closer to the Turks from Turkey. They particularly welcomed the attempts at cultural and economic support from Turkey. Still they felt a need to distinguish themselves from the Muslim Turks (see also Demirdirek 2001: chapter 5). This led to a reconstruction of the history of the Gagauz, partly with the help of older theories about their ethnogenesis. According to this reconstruction, an Oghuz nomadic tribe “Guzi” migrated from the north and settled in Dobruja, where they mixed with the Pechenegs and Kuman. The Seljuk theory, and with it an Anatolian and, more importantly, Muslim history, was thus disregarded. Even the Scythes sometimes serve as ancestors for the Gagauz, an ancestry which is somehow quite popular among the Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union. There is also a claim for the existence of an independent Gagauz state in Dobruja that allegedly flourished until it fell under “the control of the Ottoman conquerors in the XV century”⁴. For the Moldovan Gagauz the “many oppressive years under Ottoman rule”⁵ serve as an explanation for their migration into Bessarabia, and not as a claim of not being Turkic. Gagauz intellectuals emphasized their “Turkic” identity by means of the aforementioned reconstructed history and an increased use of “Turkic” motifs, especially from the great heroic past in the fine arts.

⁴ <http://www.yotor.org/wiki/en/ga/Gagauz.htm>

⁵ <http://www.governpub.com/Languages-G/Gagauz.php>

Language is, of course, a very important factor in establishing ethnic identity. It is thus no surprise that questions of language became of great importance and have been hotly debated since the period of Perestroika. Since the Gagauz share their faith and a good deal of folklore with Moldovans, Bulgarians and Russians, language is the main cultural difference among them. Connected with this is also the struggle to keep a distance from Turkishness of Turkey in order to justify being a separate nation and not just an ethnic group of immigrants on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The fear of being “swallowed up” by a much larger Turkic group can also have played a part in this. In 1995 Gagauz language classes were offered 3 hours per week in all village schools with Gagauz population. The rest of the curriculum was in Russian. In 1990 a Gagauz university was opened in Komrat. Discussions took place among intellectuals concerning what could be done to enrich the Gagauz lexicon, especially in the areas of technology and the sciences, in order to arrange for an exclusively Gagauz curriculum. One group favored adopting words from Turkish whereas another group favored Russian loans. It was argued that the respective vocabulary in Turkish was foreign, namely Arabic, anyway and that if the alternative was to use loans for scientific and technical terminology it would make more sense to use the loans already known to all Gagauz. The plans for a Gagauz curriculum were, however, not carried out.

The change of the alphabet from a Cyrillic-based to a Latin-based one was much disputed among the Gagauz in 1995. Again there was a group opting for a “Turkish” solution, i.e. the adoption of the Latin-based alphabet for Turkish, which was supported by Turkey. The other group opted for an individualized solution, arguing that the Turkish alphabet would not suit the Gagauz language because of phonetic differences. The latter group prevailed, and at the end of 1995 the new Latin-based alphabet was agreed upon. It differs from the Turkish alphabet in that it lacks the so-called soft-g and has an additional sign for the dental affricate ṭ in Russian and Romanian loans as well as a sign for an open e and for a presumed back e.

While language and the alphabet were still much debated in the public, print media in Gagauz started to flourish. The first Gagauz newspaper was *Ana Sözü* based in Kishinev, the capital of the Republic of Moldova.⁶ This newspaper was much criticized for its language. Its editors, like many Gagauz intellectuals, had attended Turkish language courses in Turkey and used words and phrases that the average Gagauz reader could not easily understand. Other newspapers were founded in Komrat, the capital of Gagauz Yeri, and Ciadir Lunga, the second biggest city. A one-hour weekly television program in Gagauz was broadcasted from Kishinev. Besides this, Turkish television was quite popular where available because of its entertaining programs. This, by the way, had an impact on the language, too. There has also been an intensive search for “famous” Gagauz persons

⁶ Since February 2005 *Ana Sözü* is accessible on the Internet: www.anasozu.com

in history. One of these famous Gagauz is Mihail Ciachir, a Gagauz priest, who was the first to write and publish in the Gagauz language. In 1934 he published a book on the history of the Gagauz (Ciachir 1934), in which he emphasizes their Turkic origin, even going so far as to state that the Gagauz spoke a purer Turkish than the Turks of Turkey. His history book continues to have a great impact on the ethnic concept of the Gagauz in the Republic of Moldova.

The declaration of Gagauz as one of the official languages of the Republic of Moldova in 1994 as well as its usefulness when traveling to Turkey led to a rise in the language's prestige. Thus parents who had been raising their children monolingually in Russian, because they thought the mastering of Russian most useful for the future of their children, now started to speak Gagauz with their children again.

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For both the Gagauz of Bulgaria and those of the autonomous region, religion is a decisive factor defining their ethnicity. While in Bulgaria it is used to claim Bulgarian ancestry, in the Republic of Moldova it serves to differentiate the Gagauz from the linguistically closest group, the Turks of Turkey. Language is practically no factor for the Gagauz of Bulgaria and consequently is not passed on to the next generation. In the autonomous region in Moldova language is the most important criterion for "Gagauzness". The efforts to pass on the language to the younger generation, a broader production of texts written in Gagauz, and, finally, the enrichment of the language are a logical outcome of this importance.

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