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Gagauz Protest Chisinau's Actions, Garnering Support From Moscow; Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 19 Issue: 119

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Last Sunday, hundreds of Gagauz took to the streets of Komrat, the capital of their autonomous region in Moldova, to protest Chisinau's plan to reduce the area's autonomy regarding elections, the government's pro-Western and anti-Russian policies and the rapidly deteriorating economic and environmental conditions in Gagauzia ([Md.tsargrad.tv](#); [Gagauzinfo.md](#), August 3). (The Gagauz region is suffering a particularly deep recession and, like the rest of Moldova, a serious drought.) The protesters and their representatives in the Moldovan parliament, who were challenging Chisinau's position on these issues, quickly received acknowledgement of support from officials in Moscow who said that the Moldovan authorities were violating the region's autonomy and that Russia would support a Gagauz claim to national self-determination, including complete independence.

Moreover, many in Moscow and their supporters in Tiraspol argued that Moldova's suppression of the Gagauz is a model for how Chisinau hopes to deal with the pro-Russian breakaway enclave of Transnistria. Not surprisingly, all this has sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity between the Gagauz and the European Union, of which Moldova is a candidate member, as well as between the Gagauz and Turkey, which views itself as the protector of the Orthodox Christian Turkic Gagauz ([Gagauzinfo.md](#), August 3). As a result, what appears at first blush to have been a minor protest by a small regional group in Moldova is rapidly escalating into a major international dispute.

The 125,000 ethnic Gagauz who live in southeastern Moldova seldom receive much press in their own right, except for the fact that they are a rare Turkic people who are mostly Orthodox Christian. But they have quickly attracted broader attention now as they have become part of Russia's geopolitical struggles with Turkey. Similarly, the Gagauz have become subject to even greater scrutiny as debates have become more heated regarding the Moldovan central government's possible plans to retake Russian-controlled Transnistria and integrate with Romania and the EU. Typically, when these issues come together, as they have on numerous occasions over the past 30 years, or are exacerbated by other matters, such as drought and economic problems, Moscow pulls out all the stops to exploit the Gagauz for its own interests. And as such, other governments and international organizations are compelled to respond. Indeed, the Russian government's actions regarding the Gagauz has often been a bellwether of the Kremlin's broader geopolitical plans (see EDM, [March 16, 2021](#); [August 5, 2021](#); [April 28](#)).

In recent weeks, Gagauz complaints about Chisinau have intensified. Parliamentarians who represent the autonomous formation have protested the government's plan to do away with a specific Gagauz electoral district, something they say violates the 1993 accord establishing relations between Chisinau and Komrat. Additionally, it represents another step toward eliminating many of the rights the region has enjoyed until now. If the Moldovan government moves ahead, these deputies say, the Gagauz will not take part in future Moldovan elections but will only hold their own votes, effectively moving themselves outside the Moldovan legal space ([Nezavisimaya gazeta](#), July 27).

Meanwhile, the Gagauz are upset that Chisinau has not addressed their economic problems or solved the water shortage that has hit their area especially hard. They say that Chisinau takes care of the pro-Western portions of the republic first and their region last, indicating that they would appeal to Moscow for help if Russia were not so heavily involved elsewhere. In about ten days, the Turkic group plans to send a delegation to Ankara to request Turkey's help on this issue and other problems ([Nezavisimaya gazeta](#), March 8).

The extent of the Gagauz's frustrations came into public view on July 31, when a mass protest took place in Komrat. Demonstrators called for Chisinau to reverse course on the republic and its pro-about Western policies, carried signs calling for the resignation of the Moldovan president and current government and appealed to Moscow for help ([Lenta.ru](#), August 1). Among the crowd,

representatives of a new social-political union, Gagauz Halk Birlii, called for Moldova, or at least Gagauzia, to ally itself with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community. Some Kremlin authorities quickly announced their support ([EADaily.com](#), August 3).

Leonid Slutsky, leader of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) and chair of the Russian State Duma's international relations committee, declared Chisinau would be making a terrible mistake if it did not respond positively to the Gagauz's demands. Slutsky posited that the requests are entirely just, and the Moldovan powers must recognize that Russia has "always supported the Gagauz people and does so now." The LDPR leader also pointed out that too many Moldovans with dual Romanian citizenship act as if they can ignore the Gagauz and the ethnic Russians in Transnistria. However, if they continue on that path and destroy the last remnants of federalism in Moldova, the country could come apart as the Gagauz, and then the people of Transnistria, seek closer relations with Russia and potentially their own statehood ([Kp.md](#), August 3). Other Russian commentators have propagated these arguments as well ([Rubaltic.ru](#), August 2).

The Gagauz protests follow a month of demonstrations across Moldova regarding both the dire economic situation and the drought. The protests came just one day before people in Transnistria marked a memorial day of their own with anti-Chisinau placards. The Moldovan government views these actions as the work of foreign anti-Moldovan agitators dispatched by Moscow who want to break Chisinau and force it to give up on integration plans with the West ([Hotnews.ro](#), July 29; [Gorodche.ru](#), August 1).

What follows these events is still uncertain. And the amount of effort and time the various outside powers are prepared to invest in the Gagauz remains unclear. In the past, each side has used issues in Gagauzia for a time, only to move on to more pressing developments elsewhere. But this time could be different. Not only are the positions of Russia and the EU more cemented and at odds than ever before, but Chisinau itself is now very much divided on whether to make concessions. Some officials there appear to believe they have no choice but to give in, while others take the exact opposite position ([Rubaltic.ru](#), August 2). The perspective that comes to dominate will likely determine whether Sunday's protest was a flash in the pan or a harbinger of a new nationalist movement that will garner special attention from the wider region as a whole.

ecoi.net summary:



Article on protests by ethnic Gagauz community against the Moldovan government and on Gagauz demands

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