

# **Gagauzians and Turkish Language within the Context of Balkans**

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays, Gagauzians live in Gagauzia within the republic of Moldova. They came in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to this region. Gagauzians are orthodox Christian in faith but nationally they belong to Oguz tribe of Turks. According to 2004 census in Gagauzia live totally 155.646 people. Beside Moldova one can meet Gagauz people in regions and countries such as Dobrudsha, North-eastern Bulgaria, Western Trace, Ukraine and Central Asia etc. Gagauzians speak Gagauz language, which is a dialect of Turkish. As Gagauzia gained the status of an autonomous territorial unit in 1995 Gagauzians started to use Turkish in public places without any problems, however there exist some severe problems regarding the use of Turkish as an instruction language. This paper deals with the usage of Turkish in public life as well as in schools in Gagauzia, from past to present within the context of Europe. This article analyses which problems do exist in the field of education and how far is developed the Gagauz press and media organs in Gagauzia.

**Keywords:** *Balkans, Gagauz people, Language issue, Language laws, Gagauz media organs.*

## **Introduction**

Following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans, the Turkish minority was gradually oppressed by the governments of the region concerning their cultural and religious life. Gagauzia was one of the foremost countries where the Gagauzians had to gain some cultural and linguistic rights throughout the history especially within the respect of the use of Turkish as a language of instruction. On the other hand, there were some countries such as Bulgaria, where Turkish minority had to face severe restrictions on its cultural and linguistic rights. Because of assimilation policy of Bulgarian government speaking Turkish language was forbidden in the public and taking Slavic names became compulsory.

This paper deals with language rights of Gagauz people as well as that of Turkish minority in Bulgaria from a comparative perspective. However the backbone of this contribution lies on how developed the use of Turkish language in the public sphere in Gaguzia and which obstacles do the Gagauz people have had by the implementation of Turkish as the language of instruction? To give an answer to these questions firstly it will be given an overview about

Gagauz population throughout the Moldovan history. Then it will be pointed out that especially in the post Second World War period the Moldovan authorities permitted the exercise of language rights for the Turks, which has been reached to its peak as the Moldovan administration issued a decree on using Turkish as a language of instruction in 1958. This presentation analyses in a further step how to be developed the language issue in the post-Cold War period. Within this context it will be indicated that although the Gagauzians made some progress regarding the use of Turkish as a language of instruction, they could not solve all problems in practise related to the implementation of Turkish as a language of instruction. In the last step the situation of the implementation of the Turkish language as a language of instruction will be compared in Moldova (Gagauzia/GagavuzYeri) and Bulgaria.

The data which was available for this research work gathered mainly from the Gagauzians and Turkish primary sources. As method the researcher used comparative analysis.

### **Moldova (Gagauzia)**

After the implementation of Latin script on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1993 by the National Assembly of Gagauzia (HalkTopluşu) the Moldovan Parliament carried the decree 1421-12 about the changing of the Gagauz alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin script on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1993, which was proposed by the linguists such as Pokrovskaya, E. Kolta, Tanasoğlu and Gaydarcı. Gaydarcı determined the rules of spelling of Gagauz Turkish and he influenced acting a law on spelling of this language in 1995. Afterwards the National Assembly of Gagauzia took a decision in January 1996, through which the use of Gagauz Turkish became compulsory on the Latin-based alphabet as a language of instruction in the all schools of the Gagauzia starting from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1996.(1) Within this decision the rules of spelling of the Gagauz Turkish (Gagavuzdilininortografiyakuralları) was recognised on the dialects of Ceadir-Lunga and Comrat which are easy and in conformity with the syntax and morphology of the Gagauz Turkish. (2) Although the Gagauz language is one of the official language out of three languages in Gagauzia since 1994 it is difficult to say that this language can be used completely free in public sphere. According to the language law of Gagauzia the head of the territorial unit (Başkan) is the only public officer who is obliged to be able to proficient in Gagauz language and to have to swear an oath in this language. Generally the people use Russian language in the administrative sphere in Gagauzia. First time in the history of Gagauzia two meetings of executive committee were held in Romanian and Gagauz languages in 2009. In this context it must be pointed out that Gagauz elites are unable to speak their native language very well. According to an opinion survey only the one third of Gagauz elites are in good command of Gagauz Turkish, whereas all of them are excellent in speaking and writing Russian language.

(3) Despite the construction of the official website of Gagauzia in four languages (Gagauz Turkish, Russian, Moldovan and English) one can notice that the information in Gagauz language is very rare and not updated. (4) The detailed information on the website of National Assembly of Gagauzia is given only in Russian.

As it will be mentioned below the Turkey's aid played an important part in implementing of the Latin alphabet in Gagauzia. The growing influence of the Turkish language over the Gagauz Turkish worries some circles in Gagauzia. Indeed the Gagauz journalists, who attended Turkish language courses since 1996 in Turkey, contributed to transfer of some Turkish vocabulary into Gagauz language. Moreover, the change of the script from Cyrillic-based to the Latin-based alphabet eased to receive the Turkish radio and television programs via satellite. So under these circumstances the percentage of people who receive Turkish TV channels via satellite increased very rapidly. An important factor which plays a role in closing Turkish and Gagauz language, is that hundreds of Gagauz women work as babysitter in Turkey. Definitely these women influenced by the Turkish language and they added some Turkish vocabulary into their native language. (5) Within this framework some Western analysers think that influenced by Turkish, Gagauz language will lost some of its original characteristics. However this situation has an impact on the vocabulary of Gagauz language in a positive way on which base it will be developed as a language of science.

### **Gagauz as a Language of Instruction**

In the past Gagauz people used the languages of the different nations as a language of instruction under whose rule they lived. Gagauz people first time used the Latin-based Rumanian alphabet in Bessarabia under the Rumanian rule in their history. (6) Gagauz people attended Bulgarian, Rumanian and Greek schools in 1930's and used the Cyrillic alphabet as it was practiced by the Karamanlis, Turks of Orthodox faith, in the past. Gagauzians were educated in their native language between 1957 and 1961 in Moldova, which were written in Cyrillic alphabet.

In the present time there are 54 schools in Gagauzia. In 51 of them the Gagauz language is used as the language of instruction. On the other hand two schools are bilingual (Rumanian/Moldovan) and the rest is the mixed school. Gagauz language is to be taught from first to twelfth grade three hours a week, whereas the Russian language is the language of instruction regarding other subjects. (7) In recent years, Education Ministry of Moldova published textbooks for Gagauz Language and Letters for the first and twelfth grades. Beside Gagauz language they teach also the history, culture and tradition of the Gagauz people.

Çimpoeş argue that due to the lack of teaching materials (especially the textbooks) and staffs it is not possible to arrange all classes in Gagauzas a language of instruction. (8)

In using Gagauz as a language of instruction on the level of higher education there are serious problems. In Comrat State University one can meet the Faculty for National Culture, which houses the Department for Gagauz Language. However the Russian language is still the language of instruction in this university.

Although it was founded a private university in Comrat namely National University of Gagauzia (GagauzMilliUniversiteti) in which the Gagauz Turkish was the language of instruction, however one semester later the education has to be ceased in this institution. (9) The reason for the closure of this university was the domination of the Russian language among the Gagauz political and cultural elites. Even the books about Gagauz culture, language and history are published in Russian language. Due to not being successful the National University of Gagauzia criticized by the Russified elites. They blamed the Gagauz Turkish for not being a language of science and culture.

In recent years however it has been published some books for children in Gagauz language. For instance, FiodorAngeli translated some books by the famous Russian poet AleksanderPuşkin and by MihailEminescu, the national poet of Moldova into Gagauz Turkish. Moreover, recently it has been published a lot of textbooks for schools. (10)

### **Gagauz Media**

First radio program broadcasted in Gagauz Turkish was “BucaanDalgasında” in 1986. In following years the broadcast time has been increased. Nowadays there is a private radio channel in Gagauzia namely “Radiostansiya Jug” that broadcasts news and music in Russian language. One can meet a National Radio and Television Broadcast of Gagauzia “GagavuzYeriRadyoveTelevizyonKurumu” (GRT) in Comrat. Although the TV programs of GRT concentrate on certain days of the week which scheduled for limited hours, radio programs last longer. After eight o’clock GRT broadcast the programs of the Turkish channel “TRT-International”. The private TV channels such as “Bizimaydınnık” and “Yeni ay” transmit on the other hand the programs of the Russian televisions. (11) The length of the TV-programs broadcasted in Russian language varies daily from one to six hours. Other programs are transmitted from Russian channels. For instance, the programs by the channel of “AyınAçık” in Chadir-Lunga are transmitted of 90 per cent by the Russian TV-channels such as ORT and RTR. On the other hand the channel “BizimAydınlık” in Comrat transmits the programs of MUZ-TV and Channel 3 in Moscow. These channels are covered by a distance of 10 to 40 kilometres. In this framework it must be pointed out that TV Sud (Vulkanneşti) and

Yeni Ay (Comrat) are the media organs that have the narrowest coverage area in Gagauzia. (12)

According to the Radio and Television Broadcasts of Moldova, it has been broadcasting for 25 years in the minority languages in Moldova. They broadcast annually 24 hours in Gagauz Turkish. The length of the programs in other languages is as follows: Ukrainian (30 hours), Bulgarian (22 hours), Russian (12 hours) and Hebrew (6 hours). (13) The disastrous situation of the Gagauz media is expressed by Tudor Zanet with following words: “We have schools, newspapers, radios and televisions in Gagauz language. The only program in Gagauz language is a half an hour program in a week by the Moldovan TV and programs on GRT in Gagauz language that last some hours. But we have no 24-hours TV programs in our native language. Thus, we have neither a radio nor a TV, where we will hear our nice Gagauz language for 24 hours. If we look at around we would not see newspapers and journals which are published in Gagauz.” (14)

### **Turkey and Gagauz Language**

Turkish government supported for the Turkish language after gaining independence of the Republic of Moldova as it has been practiced by the Turkish Ambassador to Rumania Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver in 1930's. For instance, the ninth president of Republic of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel gave firm support for the activities within the respect of education. (15) Considering the Comrat State University as a Turkish university Demirel gave a financial support for this institution in an amount of 100 thousand US-dollars during his state visit in Moldova in 1998. (16) Demirel even stated in one of his speech that he transferred a big amount of money to Comrat State University from the state funds that were available to him.

Turkey's support to promote the use of the Turkish language in Gagauzia was not only limited to the personal efforts of Demirel however. Turkey backed Gagauzia in the transition process from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. Considering the approval of Kishinev for the project on transition to the Latin alphabet, Turkey donated 200 thousands US-dollars and send Necip Hablemitoğlu to Moldova in order to observe the implementation of this project for one year. Within the framework of this project it has been prepared nearly 25 books on grammar and literature in 1998 and they have been published in Kishinev. (17) On the other hand United Nations contributed with an amount of 100 thousands US- dollars to this project as well.

Turkey supports for prospering of Gagauz language and its implementation as a language of instruction through the means of other institutions such as Turkish Cooperation Agency (TİCA). This institution realised to publish three thousands Gagauz alphabets in 1996. Moreover, TİCA sent two teachers to Comrat State University for the department of Turcology

in 2001 and gave financial aid to the Olympiads of the Gagauz language in an amount of thousand lei in the same year. (18) TİCA supports for the educational institutions in Gagauzia. For instance, it realised a project on the renovation of a boarded Kindergarten consisting 60 children, where pupils can learn in Turkish, Moldovan, Russian and Gagauz as well. (19) Since 1998 TİCA has been contributing to the development of Gagauz language and culture. As some examples we can mention, the subvention of the newspapers such as “Ana Sözü” and “Sabah Yıldızı” (20) and the completion of the renovation of Atatürk Library in Comrat and donation of thousands books to this library in 2013. (21)

Moreover, Turkish NGO’s contributed to the development of the Gagauz language in Gagauzia as well. Among these institutions that supported for Gagauz Turkish as a language of instruction one can mention the Foundation of the Turkic World (Turkish Abbreviation: TDAV), which organised 3-month Turkish courses for the teachers from all over the Turkic World in the Language Center “KaşgarlıMahmut” in İstanbul in 1990’s, in which 60 teachers participated from the all parts of Turkic World. In every term about five to ten teachers from Gagauzia learned Turkish in these courses. Apart from this TDAV organised Turkish courses in the Turkish Culture Centre in Comrat which was established in 1990. However these Turkish courses ceased to exist after a while. (22)

### **Bulgaria**

The Peter Mladenov administration made an end of the assimilation policy of Zhivkov era and a law enacted in 1991 authorised the Turks to take their Turkish names back. Thus, gradually Turkish names have been purified of Slavic endings like –ov/ova, -ev/eva. New administration allowed Turks to speak Turkish without any restriction. (23) Bulgarian government took some symbolic steps in order to promote the use of Turkish language in the public sphere such as allowing Turkish courses in 1991 in the regions where Turks lived in majority. (24) In 1994, the Bulgarian government passed a law on the permission of introducing Turkish courses of four hours a week in the elementary schools. Five years later taking part in Turkish courses was made compulsory for the Turkish pupils of classes from first to twelfth. In the same year, they started to teach Turkish compulsorily for hours a week in regions such as Kurdzhali and Razgrad, where it has been existed large Turkish communities. (25) In this context it must be emphasized, that there was a severe lack of Turkish teaching staff. To tackle this problem, the Bulgarian government founded classes at the High Institute for Pedagogy in Shumen (1992) and at the Institute of Pedagogy in Kurdzhali (1993). Turkish Government supports these educational institutions by launching programmes on teaching staff for Turkish language. For instance, whereas Turkey gave support for Turkology departments within the universities of

Shumen and Kurdzhali in Bulgaria, she arranged summer seminars for Turkish teachers in Turkey. (26)

The Bulgarian constitution and the law on national education are the legal institutions within which framework Turkish language should be thought as the mother tongue of Turkish pupils in state schools. The Constitution of Bulgaria guarantees the rights of freedom of thought and the freedom of the use of mother tongue as well. According to paragraph 36<sup>th</sup> of this constitution, Bulgarian citizens whose mother tongue are not Bulgarian language, ought to learn Bulgarian obligatory and they have the rights of learning their mother tongues. (27) Bulgarian government considered the positive developments in term of using Turkish language and introducing compulsory Turkish lessons four hours a week and daily ten minutes news program in the Bulgarian Television as a useful devices for guaranteeing the Bulgarian membership in the EU. For instance, the development report 2001 by the EU underlined only above mentioned TV programme regarding the language issue. In the following years, EU reports did not mention the language issue any more, they focused rather on the socio-economic problems by the Turkish minority thought to be integrated in the Bulgarian main society.(28) Although Bulgarian government signed the “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” in 1997, it avoided to fulfil the requirements of this agreement for the Turkish minority. (29) In this context it is obvious that the Sofia fostered the minority rights so far as they served for Bulgarian membership in the EU.

### **The Turkish Media in Bulgaria**

Nowadays there are no visual media organs, radios and TV channels by the Turks of Bulgaria at local and national levels. However in this country it has been existing a 3-hours daily radio programme in Turkish since 1945, which was closed in the period of 1984-1989, Bulgarian government stopped the sender of this radio on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. In February this problem has been solved within the incentives of Turkish Radio and Television Company (Turkish Abbreviation: TRT). There is only one TV program by the Bulgarian National TV BNT-1, in which they broadcast in working days a ten minutes news bulletin in Turkish, which was mentioned in the 2000 EU report as well. (30) However nationalist NGO’s and parties opposes this programme. For instance, ultra nationalist ATAKA launched a campaign against this news program in the Bulgarian TV in 2009. Even ATAKA and GERB party reached a consensus on holding a referendum for removing this news program from the national TV. They consider Turkish language as a minority language that signalises the legacy of the Ottoman rule in

Bulgaria. (31) The leader of the Party of Bulgarian Men, Rosen Markov, collected about 12 thousands signatures from people in Varna, who were opposing to broadcast of Turkish news bulletin in BNT-1 in 2009. (32)

### **Turkey and Turkish Language**

Turkey supported the Turks of Bulgaria through signing of the bi- and multilateral agreements with Bulgaria such as the Treaty of Ankara in 1925. However, there was no specific treaty which regulated the rights of the Turkish minority in terms of education. Ankara encourages the Turks of Bulgaria for reaching the aim of the Turkish as a language of instruction on different levels. Within this framework we can mention preparing textbook for Turkish lessons in Bulgaria and giving a special quota for Turks of Bulgaria who want to get a grant for studying at the Turkish universities. For instance, Turkey received 1,263 students from Bulgaria in 2013. (33)

Turkish Government published five thousands updated textbooks for fourth classes in 2013 and distributed in Bulgarian cities such as Kurdzali and Burgas. (34) Turkish statesmen supported the demand of Turks of Bulgaria for achieving their aim Turkish as a language of instruction in all occasions. For Instance, ex-Prime Minister of Turkey, RecepTayyipErdoğan, in Kurdzali in 2008 underlined the importance of Turkish as a language of instruction and required the Turks of Bulgaria to protect their language and culture. (35) Despite the positive developments regarding the use of Turkish language, the Turkish Government and MRFPP behaved too passive for realising Turkish as a language of instruction. Therefore Ankara could not get required permissions for opening branches of Turkish Development and Cooperation Agency (Turkish abbreviation: TİKA) and the YunusEmre Institute, which are responsible for Turkish “Kulturarbeit” abroad.

### **Pressure on Turkish Language in Bulgaria**

Despite the EU membership of Bulgaria there are some restrictions in using basic rights for Turks of Bulgaria such as Turkish as a language of instruction, lack of skilled Turkish teachers and so on. National education law has to bring in line with requirements of Turks regarding to introduce Turkish as a language of instruction in schools. This law considers Turkish as a European language such as English, German and French. (36) If a pupil decides for learning Turkish, he or she cannot choose one of the other West European languages. In this case parents think that their children can learn Turkish at home. So they are interested in sending their children for a course where they can learn a West European language instead of Turkish. Within this framework it is not surprisingly that there is not enough demand for Turkish courses. For



example, 114 thousands pupils participated in Turkish lessons in 1992, whereas this figure has reduced to seven thousands in 2011. (37)

Sofia makes however pressure on the use of Turkish language on the different levels. The mayor of Plovdiv, Ivan Totev changed the Turkish name of “Cuma Meydanı” (Friday Square) in 2012 and renamed it “Rimski Ploşad” (Rome Square). (38) In 2013 the municipality of Varna decided to change the Turkish names of 215 places within the boundaries of the town. For instance, the name of some village will be changed as follows: Akça Ağaç as Yalovo and Yeşil Tarla as Zelenata Niva. Similar decisions were taken by the other local authorities such as the city of Burgas. (39) The municipality of Varna considered changing 350 Turkish names with Bulgarian ones. Due to the initiative of the Turkish Foreign Ministry in the first half of 2014 the municipality of Varna has prevented from this idea. (40)

### **Conclusions**

Due to the many bi- and multilateral agreements between Ankara and Sofia, Bulgarian Government continues to violate the basic human rights of Turks. Measures taken by Bulgarian Government for promoting the use of Turkish language in the public life are rather in a symbolic manner. Regardless of the assimilation policy of the Zhivkov regime, Bulgarian authorities repress even today the language rights of Turks of Bulgaria in some extent. As I mentioned above local authorities in Plovdiv and Varna changed the Turkish names of places with Bulgarian ones. Even the Bulgarian Government can violate the basic rights of communication of Turkish minority as we showed in the example of preventing the 3-hours Turkish radio from broadcasting to the listeners in January 2015. Turks of Bulgaria have to fight for gaining their democratic rights. Turkish authorities in Ankara and MRFP since 1990 in Bulgarian parliament have also their share for not succeeding in introducing Turkish as a language of instruction. MRFP should set an agenda for Turkish as a language of instruction and defend it in every international platform.

Due to the territorial autonomy of Gagauzia the situation of Turkish language is considered to be as positive compared with that of Bulgaria. According to constitution of Gagauzia Turkish is a language of instruction, which is not the case in Bulgaria. However it is a serious problem that nowadays in Gagauzia there are a few newspaper the majority of which publish in Russian language. It is not enough to publish some media organs such as Mother Words (Ana Sözü), The Voice of Gagauz (Gagavuz Sesi), The Word of Gagauz (Gagavuz Sözü) and Morning Star (Sabah Yıldızı) in Gagauz language. The numbers and qualities of these newspapers will be increased. The situation of the TV and radio channels is disastrous. The quality and broadcasting time of these media organs inclusive Radio and Television Broadcast of Gagauzia

are very poor. As stressed by Zanet it should be founded TV and radio channels that broadcast 24 hours in Gagauz Turkish.

As I mentioned above Demirel supported Comrat State University. The aid by Turkey is very important for Gagauzia whose resources are very poor. Moreover in recent time it has been opened some Turkish language courses that closes Turkey and Gagauzia within the respect of lingual and cultural issues.

If we consider the current situation of Gagauzia in a comparative perspective with that of the other Balkan countries (e.g. Bulgaria), we can realise that there is no legal obstacle on the way for using of Gagauz language as a language of instruction in this country. For instance, tens of thousands of Turks in Bulgaria are excluded from using their mother tongue in public sphere and the Bulgarian authorities changed the Turkish names of some places. On the other hand Gagauz people exercise the rights of having their mother tongue as a language of instruction in Moldova. That means they can use Gagauz language in the public sphere without any limitation. The problem in Gagauzia however is that Gagauz people lack of financial and human resources for implementing of the Gagauz language in administrative and educational sphere.

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