

Gagauz

The Gagauz are a [Turkic people](#) minority of Southern [Moldova](#) (in [Gagauzia](#)) and of Southern Bessarabia ([Bugeac](#)) that numbers around 250,000.

They are probably the descendants of the [Oghuz Turks](#) that settled down in this area in the [11th century](#) and adopted [Christianity](#). In fact they, along with the [Chuvash](#) people of the [Russian Federation](#), are the only ethnic Turkic groups which are predominantly Christian (and [Eastern Orthodox](#)).

Gagauz people have settlements in the Ukrainian regions of [Odesa](#) and [Zaporizhzhia](#), as well as [Kazakhstan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), [Kabardino-Balkaria](#), and [Romania](#). There are also nearly 20,000 Gagauz living in the Balkan countries of [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#).

There is a related ethnic group also called Gagauz living in the European side of [Turkey](#) and in the [Republic of Macedonia](#), and they are [Muslims](#).

Ancestors of the Gagauz can be traced to the early [nomadic tribes](#), [Guzi](#) and [Uzi](#). Byzantine written history records that in the [11th century](#) the nomadic tribe Guzi crossed the [Danube](#) River and settled in the Balkan regions of [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#). Once settled in these new regions, the Guzi people shifted to a sedentary lifestyle and adopted Orthodox Christianity. The ethnic mixes of the Guzi with other Turkic tribes of the [Pechenegi](#), [Polovtsi](#) and [Kumani](#) are direct descendants of modern day Gagauzians.

After living many oppressive years under Ottoman rule, the Gagauz migrated to territories ruled by [Russia](#) via the Danube between [1750](#) and [1846](#). They then settled in southern [Bessarabia](#) regions. Turkic-speaking tribes of the [Nogai Horde](#) inhabited the [Budjak](#) Region of southern Bessarabia from the 16th to [18th centuries](#). Before [1807](#), a portion of these tribes were forced to abandon Budjak by the czarist government of [Russia](#) and resettled in [Crimea](#), [Azov](#) and [Stavropol](#). The Gagauz and Bulgarian migrants then appeared in the settlements vacated by the Nogai tribes. Russia gave these immigrants from the Danube incentives to relocate here by allocating land and helping them settle this new territory. They also taught these new settlers to speak and write Russian. At the same time, inhabitants of northern Bessarabia were also settling this area, as well as peasants fleeing Russian serfdom, German colonizers from the Duchy of Warsaw and others. The Gagauz settled [Avdarma](#), [Comrat](#), [Congaz](#), [Tomai](#), [Cismichioi](#) and other former Nogai villages located in the central Budjak Region. These immigrants transformed the barren Budjak steppes into a fertile agricultural region.

The Gagauz language was written in the [Greek alphabet](#) up to [1957](#), when a modified form of [Cyrillic](#) was adopted.

With the exception of a five-day independence in the winter of 1906, when a peasant uprising declared the autonomous [Republic of Comrat](#), the Gagauzian

people have been ruled by the [Russian Empire](#), Romania, [Germany](#), and the [Soviet Union](#).

Gagauz nationalism remained an intellectual movement during the 1980's but strengthened by the end of the decade as the Soviet Union began to embrace democratic ideals. In [1988](#), activists from the local intelligentsia aligned with other ethnic minorities to create the movement known as the "Gagauz People". A year later the "Gagauz People" held its first assembly which accepted the resolution to create an autonomous territory in southern [Moldova](#) with Comrat designated as capital. In August of [1990](#), [Comrat](#) declared itself an autonomous republic, but the Moldovan government annulled the declaration as unconstitutional. The Gagauz national movement intensified when Romanian was accepted as the official language of the Republic of Moldova. The multiethnic populations of southern Moldova regarded this decision with concern, precipitating a lack of confidence in the central government located in Chisinau. The Gagauz were also worried about the implications for them if Moldova reunited with Romania, as seemed increasingly likely at the time.

Support for the Soviet Union remained high, with an almost unanimous 'yes' vote to staying in the USSR in a referendum of March 1991 (Moldovans in Gagauzia boycotted the referendum however). Many Gagauz supported the [Moscow coup attempt](#), further straining relations with Chisinau. However, when the Moldovan parliament voted on whether Moldova should become independent 6 of the 12 Gagauz deputies voted 'yes.' Gagauzia declared itself independent on 19th August 1991, followed in September by [Transnistria](#). The moves prompted the nationalist Popular Front to tone down its pro-Romanian line and speak up for the rights of minorities.

In February 1994 President [Mircea Snegur](#) promised the Gagauz autonomy, though he was against outright independence. He was also opposed to the suggestion that Moldova become a federal state made up of three republics - Moldova, Gagauzia, and Transnistria.

Only on [December 23, 1994](#) did the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova accept the "Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia" (*Gagauz Yeri*), resolving the dispute peacefully. This date is now a Gagauzian holiday. Many European human-rights organizations recognize Gagauzia as a successful model for resolving ethnic conflict for other countries to follow. Gagauzia was now a 'national-territorial autonomous unit' with three official languages (Russian, Gagauz and Moldovan (Romanian)).

30 settlements, including 3 towns and 27 villages, expressed their desire to be included in the Autonomous Gagauz Territory as a result of a referendum to determine Gagauzia's borders. In 1995, [George Tabunshik](#) was elected to serve as the Governor ([Bashkan](#)) of Gagauzia for a four year term as were the deputies of the local parliament, "The People's Assembly" and its chairman [Peter Pashali](#).

In 1994, the Parliament of Moldova awarded to "the people of Gagauzia" the right of "external self-determination".