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Gagauzia – a Russian destabilisation tool

The authorities of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia display openly pro-Russian attitudes and seek to deepen relations with the Russian Federation. Protests are organised during the visits of representatives of the authorities of the Republic of Moldova to the region. Gagauzia, controlled by the Ilan Șor political group, has become the most important Russian tool used to destabilise the situation in Moldova.

Bashkan travels to Moscow. The Bashkan of the Gagauz Autonomy, Yevgeniya Guțul, has visited Russia twice in the past six weeks (the Bashkan is the Autonomy's most important representative and as well as head of government). On her first visit, she met with Federation Council President Valentina Matviyenko (1 March 2024) and took part in the World Youth Festival in Sochi, during which she had a brief conversation with President Vladimir Putin (6 March 2024). During her second visit, there was another meeting with Matviyenko and the signing of an agreement between the Gagauzian authorities and Promviazbank was announced (9 March 2024). This is a Russian state-owned bank with strong links to the military sector, which was subject to Western sanctions immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Under this agreement, residents of Gagauzia are to be given the opportunity to open bank accounts that will be used to transfer financial allowances to pensioners and budget employees from the Autonomy. It was announced that these allowances would be financed by 'partners from Russia'. Starting from 1 May 2024, 20,000 pensioners and 5,000 budget sphere employees are to be covered by this form of assistance. Guțul also asked Gazprom to sell gas to Autonomy customers at a lower price. During her visits, she was accompanied by the president of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia (PAG), Dmitry Konstantinov.

At her first meeting with the president of the Russian Federation Council, Guțul complained that Russian supporters were being persecuted in Moldova. During her second visit, she announced that the Autonomy would declare independence in the event of a merger between Moldova and Romania, and said that if Moldovan troops were introduced into Gagauzia, she would "ask for help from everyone, including the Russian Federation".

The topic of Gagauzia has been widely covered by Russian propaganda in recent times. Putin's meeting with Guțul was reported by the Kremlin's press service, the issue of Moldova and the Autonomy was covered in two extensive analytical pieces by the RIA Novosti agency, and Bashkan herself was a guest on Vladimir Soloviev's programme. The Russian coverage highlights the difficult situation of the Russian-speaking population and national minorities in Moldova. After Guțul's first visit to Russia, she met other leaders of pro-Russian forces, including former Moldovan presidents Vladimir Voronin and Igor Dodon.

Yevgeniya Guțul won the election of the Bashkhan of Gagauzia, the second round of which took place on 14 May 2023, as a representative of the Șor Party. The politician emphasises her close relations with the fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, whom she describes as the leader of her political camp ("IEE Commentaries", no. 940). Șor himself has recently been in Russia and has made no secret of the fact that his political activities are financed thanks to the support of his Russian partners.

President and Prime Minister visit Gagauzia. On 28 March 2024, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Dorin Recean, met with entrepreneurs from the Gagauz Autonomy in the village of Congaz. His visit was accompanied by a street protest, organised by supporters of Guțul and Șor. On the same day, an interview with the Minister of Infrastructure, Andrei Spînu, was due to air on local television. However, its progress was interrupted by Dmitry Konstantinov, who unexpectedly appeared in the studio and stated that he also wanted to take part in the programme. The Minister of Infrastructure refused to take part in the discussion with the PNB

chairman due to his cooperation with the 'Şor criminal group'. Both politicians had previously accused each other of lying about the value of state investments in the Autonomy.

On 29 March 2024, the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, travelled to the construction site of a new power line connecting the town of Vulcăneşti, located in Gagauzia, with Chisinau. A protest was also organised along her route, forcing the head of state to take a different route. On the other hand, on 10 March 2024, Maia Sandu met with local mayors, as well as students of the State University of Komrat. The discussion focused on the development of cities, the possibility of external financial assistance, and the issue of changes to the operation of courts in the region. Protesters gathered in front of the university building. In all of the cases mentioned, the demonstrators demanded the resignation of the president and the government as well as the restoration of the broadcasting of Russian TV channels, and opposed the reduction of the Autonomy's powers by the central authorities.

Conclusions. Yevgeniya Guţul's brief conversation with Vladimir Putin was the first meeting between a Moldovan politician and official and the Russian president since the country's invasion of Ukraine. The actions and statements of the Bashkan of Gagauzia make her the most radically pro-Russian actor on the Moldovan political scene. At the same time, there is no doubt that the Kremlin is currently betting on Guţul and Ilan Şor, who is her political patron and sponsor. Similar cooperation – including meetings with the most important people in Russia and contracts with the state bank – cannot be counted on by other political forces in Moldova at present. Guţul's statements have reverberated much more widely in Russian propaganda than the Transnistrian Congress of the All-Levels Deputies and its pleas for support ("IEŚ Commentaries", no. 1072). In Moldova, Guţul's meetings with former presidents were widely reported. Until recently, they were not taken seriously, were seen as an artificial political product of the Şor, and were ridiculed due to their many awkward moments and Guţul's problems with formulating statements. Many commentators interpreted these meetings as a signal that Bashkan of Gagauzia had now become the leader of pro-Russian forces.

Guţul's numerous statements are provocative and manipulative, and her promises are hardly credible or difficult to interpret clearly; for example: the right for Gagauzia to declare independence in the event of Moldova's loss of sovereignty is part of the 1994 agreement that created the Autonomy. Raising this topic in the Russian media was only intended to attract attention. Statements concerning the presence of the Moldovan military in Gagauzia are completely detached from reality. The Autonomy is an integral part of the state and there have long been military bases there. Announcements of receiving cheaper gas from Gazprom have been repeated for months, but it is difficult to imagine a way of realising them. In contrast, making a deal with a bank subject to Western sanctions, which Moldova has also joined, is pure provocation. Importantly, this bank uses the Russian MIR payment card system, which is not supported by Moldovan banks. This means that using the money in private accounts will require online transactions or cash withdrawals in Transnistria. Both forms will be quite cumbersome for the main target group of this scheme, which is pensioners.

The Moldovan ruling camp has consistently avoided any contact with Yevgeniya Gutul, treating her as a representative of a criminal group. Maia Sandu has so far not appointed her as a member of the government of the Republic of Moldova, despite the law indicating so. The new Bashkan has found the support of the majority of deputies of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia. As a result, the central authority is in a state of dispute with this institution as well (individual deputies of the PNA, in opposition to

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Gagauz Autonomy's relations with the central authority have developed along a spectrum of cold but constructive distance and clear conflict. The society of the region is particularly sensitive to issues of dignity and recognition of its political rights. The Şor political group has thus succeeded in inserting anti-government and pro-Russian activity into the existing identity dispute. The central authorities find themselves in a situation where maintaining a consistent stance towards the Şor group further fuels tensions in relations with Gagauzia and leads to the consolidation of the local community around Guţul. The president and the government are attempting to counter this by developing relationships with local community organisations as well as town and village authorities. These actions, however right, are reactive in nature. If they are part of a larger strategy towards the region, it has been implemented rather late.

Russia will use Gagauzia to destabilise the political situation and increase social tension in Moldova. These activities are expected to intensify ahead of the presidential elections and the referendum on European integration. Both votes will take place on 20 October 2024. The Autonomy has always been characterised by pro-Russianism, but we are now facing a new situation. Until recently, local leaders relied on public sympathy towards Russia to pursue their own business and political goals ('Comments of the IEA', no. 628). Now an external political force, dependent on the Kremlin, has taken power in the Autonomy.

Nevertheless, interpretations appearing in the Western media comparing Gagauzia to the Donbass and suggesting the possibility of real separatism should now be considered exaggerated. The Autonomy, whose inhabitants make up about 5% of the state's population, is not territorially compact – it consists of three geographically distinct parts. Its inhabitants do not display radical and anti-Moldovan attitudes (at the level of inter-ethnic relations). It is difficult to imagine local social groups that could pursue such separatism. Importantly, in the immediate neighbourhood, beyond Moldova's borders, there are no forces that could support it.