

April 30 - Elections in Gagauzia. Who will be the new leader of the autonomous region and what will its future be?

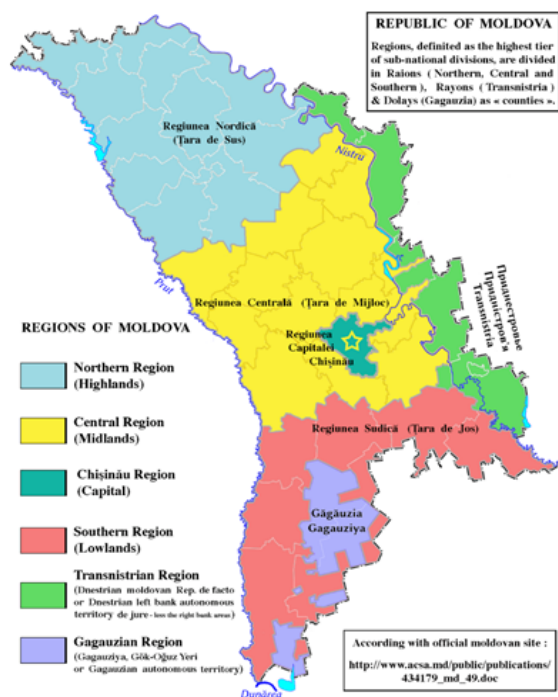
Author: **Ecaterina DADIVERINA**, Expert, New Strategy Center

On April 30, elections will be held for the post of Governor (Bashkan) of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, a region located in the south of the country as part of the Republic of Moldova, with a population of 134,000 citizens. The majority of the inhabitants is represented by the Gagauz population, who are ethnic Turks and Orthodox Christians. The Bashkan is responsible for all public administration authorities in Gagauzia and is the region's representative in Moldova and at an international level.

The elections in Gagauzia are much more important now that Russia has launched a broad hybrid war to destabilise the Republic of Moldova. As such, the investiture of a pro-Russian and radical leader in Gagauzia would result in much more tense relations with the Moldovan authorities and could lead to pro-separatist actions that could increase instability in the country, thus serving Moscow's interests. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that 37 thousand ethnic Gagauz citizens live in Ukraine's Odessa region, which borders the Republic of Moldova, therefore an increase of instability in Gagauzia may also affect the situation in the neighbouring region within Ukraine.

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The pro-European policy of President Maia Sandu and the government in Chisinau has generated a series of destabilising hybrid actions from Russia. Russia's hybrid toolbox is not limited to the separatist region of Transnistria, where it has 1 600 soldiers, as it can also create an additional point of tension and instability in the south of the Republic of Moldova, in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, near Ukraine and Romania. Gagauzia has a predominantly Russian-speaking and Russophile population and Moscow's propaganda dominates the public sphere.¹ The Gagauz are also close to Turkey, for cultural and linguistic reasons, but

¹ "Russian Propaganda Dominates Moldova's Gagauzia", IWPR.net, available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/russian-propaganda-dominates-moldovas-gagauzia>

² "Gagauz future lies in Moldova: Turkish deputy PM", AA.com, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/gagauz-future-lies-in-moldova-turkish-deputy-pm/755236>

Ankara, unlike Moscow, has not tried to incite separatism. On the contrary, when Turkish officials visited Gagauzia, they declared that the future of the region should be only within the Republic of Moldova.²

Eight candidates with predominantly pro-Russian views entered the election race on April 30. At the moment, according to a local survey, 4 candidates seem to be better placed in the Gagauz electoral race: Victor Petrov, Grigori Uzun, Nicolai Dudoglo, Mihail Formuzal.³

Candidates for the Bashkan seat

- 1) **Victor Petrov** is an independent MP in the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, with close ties to the pro-Russian Party of Socialists, led by former President Igor Dodon, who is close to the Kremlin. Petrov often focuses on Moldova's relationship with Russia and holds anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-Romania positions. He owned the website gagauznews.md, blocked on 26 February by the Chisinau authorities for promoting information inciting hatred and war.⁴ Petrov intended to launch negotiations regarding gas

³ "Results of a poll on candidates for Bashkan in Gagauzia - who is leading?", Gagauznews, available at: <https://gagauznews.com/108965/rezultaty-oprosa-o-kandidatah-v-bashkany-gagauzii-cto-lidiruet.html>

⁴ "Gagauznews.md connected to an MP from Gagauzia", Rise Moldova, available at: https://www.facebook.com/risemoldova/posts/3055380841368433/?locale=hi_IN

supplies to the region with Gazprom's aid, sending a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁵ He has been a mouthpiece for Russian propaganda, claiming that the Chisinau authorities are intending to fraud the elections by preventing the presence of Russian observers.⁶ The leader of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia expressed support for Petrov's candidacy, saying that his team will strengthen Moldova's relations with Russia and Tatarstan.⁷

- 2) **Dmitri Croitor** is the Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.⁸ He is supported by the current Bashkan, Irina Vlah.
- 3) **Grigorii Uzun** is a former member of the Moldovan Parliament. In the 2016 presidential elections, he was the representative of the pro-Russian socialist presidential candidate Igor Dodon.⁹
- 4) **Mihail Formuzal** is the former Bashkan of Gagauzia. During his tenure, a referendum was held in

Gagauzia on Moldova's accession to the Eurasian Customs Union.

- 5) **Serghei Cimpoeș** is another member of the Gagauz People's Assembly, known for his criticism of the current Bashkan Irina Vlah. Cimpoeș previously won just over 7% of the vote. He supported the consultative referendum on joining the Eurasian Customs Union.¹⁰
- 6) **Nicolai Dudoglo** is a former mayor of the region's capital Comrat (2004-2014) who has refused to admit that Russia is the aggressor in the war in Ukraine.¹¹
- 7) **Eugenia Guțul** is a new actor on the political scene in Gagauzia, being the candidate of the pro-Russian party "Shor".
- 8) **Serghei Cernev** is an independent candidate. He has pleaded for good relations with the Moldovan leadership and the EU, but has received only 0.1% of the vote in the past.¹²

⁵ "Three MPs from ATU Gagauzia would go to the Russian Federation to negotiate directly with Gazprom a contract for the supply of natural gas to the region. Bashkan advisor Irina Vlah: "We believe that this is not possible" Ziarul de Gardă, available at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/trei-deputati-din-uta-gagauzia-ar-urma-sa-mearga-in-federatia-rusa-pentru-a-negocia-direct-cu-gazprom-un-contract-pentru-aprovizionarea-cu-gaze-naturale-a-regiunii-consilierul-bascanei-irina-vlah/>

⁶ "Candidate for head of Gagauzia accused Chisinau of intent to falsify election results", TASS, available at:

<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17581025>

⁷ "Unexpectedly-neeanno". Kommersant, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5939899>

⁸ "He will give up the post of ambassador for that of Bashkan of Gagauzia", Știri.md, available at: <https://stiri.md/article/politica/van-unta-la-functia-de-ambasador-pentru-cea-de-bascan-al-gagauziei>

⁹ "All candidates for the Bashkan of Gagauzia. Who are they and what do we know about them?". Newsmaker.md, available at: <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vse-kandidaty-v-bashkany-gagauzii-kto-oni-i-chto-o-nih-izvestno/>

¹⁰ "A member of the Gagauz legislature is not allowed to register in the electoral race", TV6.md, available at: <https://tv6.md/ro/2023/03/25/un-deputat-din-legislativul-gagauz-nu-este-lasat-sa-se-inregistreze-in-cursa-electoralala/>

¹¹ "Gagauzia - between "we love Ukraine" and "we support Russia", Radio Free Europe Moldova, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/g%C4%83g%C4%83uzia---%C3%AEntre-iubim-ucraina-%C8%99i-sus%C8%9Binem-rusia-/32333953.html>

¹² „CANDIDATE PROFILE: SERGHEI CERNEV”, *Moldova curată*, available at: <https://www.moldovacurata.md/profil-candidat-serghei-cernev-1-2584>

The Chisinau authorities do not officially support any candidate, one reason being the low popularity of the ruling PAS party in Gagauzia. Thus, from the pro-European forces' point of view, the stake of the elections in Gagauzia is "damage limitation", as they hope to elect a moderate Bashkan who will not encourage destabilising actions, who will maintain social stability and be an open partner in negotiations. The Socialists are counting on several candidates, with former Socialist President Igor Dodon announcing his support for Grigory Uzun and two of the party's leaders, Alexandr Suhodolskii and Vasile Bolea, backing Petrov. Bolea is also heading Petrov's election staff.¹³ Moscow did not express its sympathies directly either, one reason being that most of the candidates have an electoral rhetoric that favours relations with Russia.

If no candidate wins a majority of votes in the first round, voters in Gagauzia will go to the polls again on 14 May to choose one of the two best-placed candidates.

¹³ "PSRM - one, Vasile Bolea - another: Socialist MP heads electoral staff of Gagauz candidate Victor Petrov". Unimedia, available at: <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/f24cf60c7fb4582f/psrm-pe-unul-vasile-bolea-pe-altul-deputatul-socialist-conduce-stafful-electoral-al-candidatului-din-gagauzia-victor-petrov.html>