

# Mobilization of Non-titular Ethnicities during the Last Years of the Soviet Union: Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the Lithuanian Poles

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Post-Soviet states spent their formative years in a struggle for statehood. The emergence of unrecognized states is one of the most extreme examples of this struggle. Four secessionist polities, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, have gained *de facto* independence from their host countries, but their independence has not been recognized by the international community, and confrontations with the host states continue.<sup>1</sup> Diplomatic initiatives have barely produced feasible solutions, but, on the other hand, massive bloodshed had not occurred after the ceasefires in 1992–94 until the South Ossetian War in August 2008. The international community, including influential powers, then lost interest in these conflicts, which began to be regarded as “frozen and forgotten.”<sup>2</sup> However, the South Ossetian War demonstrated that these conflicts could be “unfrozen” at any moment and, therefore, should not be “forgotten.”

The unrecognized states in post-Soviet territories originated from non-titular<sup>3</sup> ethnicities’ collective actions targeted at defending their culture and language. For this purpose, they tried to strengthen or even create anew a territorial autonomy, which they regarded as the most reliable legal guarantee against titular groups’ assimilative policy.<sup>4</sup> One might find this motivation in a number of “hot points” in the late-Perestroika Soviet Union: Abkhazia and South Ossetia of Georgia, Crimea of Ukraine, Transnistria and Gagauzia of Moldova, the “Polish” districts of Lithuania, and the Narva-Sillamae region of Estonia.

Having caused large-scale conflicts, these collective actions produced different outcomes even before the end of the Soviet regime. Four of them crystal-

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1 The Russian government recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26, 2008.

2 See the following articles: Ceslav Ciobanu, “NATO/EU Enlargement: Moldova and the ‘Frozen and Forgotten’ Conflicts in Post-Soviet States,” [<http://www.ipp.md/search.php?l=ro&sid=8aef502cc98f502f93ea45a65172fb47>], 20.10.2008; Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and de facto States* (Washington, D. C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004); Tim Potier, *Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia: A Legal Appraisal* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2001).

3 “Titular nation” is an official term of Soviet and other socialist nationality policies, which means a nation representing a certain administrative unit and sub-national government.

4 For example, territorial units with autonomous status were granted more deputies in the union and republican parliaments.

lized as de facto independent states; some did not go further than autonomy within the host countries (Gagauzia and Crimea), and the others abandoned their request for territorial autonomy (Lithuanian Poles and Narva-Sillamae). Applying resource mobilization theory, this paper analyzes the reasons for this diversification, despite the similarities that these movements revealed at the initial stage. I explain the diversification of de facto independence of Transnistria, a compromise – autonomy of Gagauzia, and the complete failure of Lithuanian Poles. This paper focuses on a relatively early period, since late-1988, when the autonomy movements became visible, until mid-1990, when Transnistria created the basic state structures and proclaimed independence from the Moldovan SSR.<sup>5</sup> This focus is explained by my view that the different outcomes of autonomous movements were predetermined by the initial conditions that they faced.

Although there were more than one hundred ethnicities in the Soviet Union, only in the eight cases listed above did non-titular ethnicities and sub-national governments attempt to create or strengthen their territorial autonomy. Incapable of organizing large-scale mass movement, which might affect decision-making at the union republic levels and in Moscow, and therefore regarding their own ethnic and regionalist mobilization as costly and risky, small ethnicities and regions became self-assertive only when the leaders found that the benefits of mobilization surpassed its cost. According to Charles Tilly, passing this threshold may take place, most likely, as a result of the minority leaders' interactions with the government and other contenders.<sup>6</sup> Tilly lists at least four motives for collective action: shared interests (advantages and disadvantages resulting from their interactions with other groups); common identity and organizational integrity; available resources under collective control; and the opportunity or threat that these collective actions face.<sup>7</sup> Among these motives, Tilly makes much of resources, while Sidney Tarrow appreciates opportunity as the main determinant that diversified ethnic and democratic mobilization in the late-Soviet period.<sup>8</sup> According to him, opportunities for drastic social change bestow resource-poor actors the possibility to organize a new social movement.<sup>9</sup> This view seems to explain why Lithuanian Poles and Gagauzians began to mobilize themselves, when the anticipated cost of this mobilization seemed to surmount these groups' capacity.

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5 In September 1991, Gagauzia and Transnistria abandoned their policy, aimed at autonomy within the Moldovan SSR, and began to request their complete separation from it (but not from the USSR).

6 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1978), p. 98.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

8 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 99.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 96.

Collective actions require organizational infrastructure, such as face-to-face communities, social networks, and institutions.<sup>10</sup> This role was played by the United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK) and Gagauz Halki (the Gagauz People)<sup>11</sup> in Transnistria and Gagauzia respectively, and by Šalčininkai and Vilnius District Soviets for Lithuanian Poles. The local and republican Soviet elections in 1990 endorsed these organizations with the legitimacy to speak in the name of the nationalities and regions they represented. Among these organizations, OSTK in Transnistria, unifying industrialists and workers, had the greatest access to economic resources of the region to be used for collective actions. As Tilly notes, this collective control of resources was a crucial prerequisite for gaining the loyalty of followers.<sup>12</sup>

The first section describes the similarities that these movements had at their initial stage, while the second section scrutinizes why these movements became diversified. The toughest extreme of this diversification, Transnistria, left few options to the host government of Moldova, other than military ones, in 1992.

#### SIMILARITIES AT THE EARLY STAGE OF MOBILIZATION

Charles Ragin identified three major motives for ethnic mobilization: developmental, reactive, and competitive.<sup>13</sup> Taras relies on Ragin's theory to analyze titular ethnicities' movements in union republics.<sup>14</sup> In my view, Ragin's theory is applicable to non-titular groups, as well. For example, ethnic mobilization intensified when titular and non-titular groups competed for the same rewards, such as language dominance and titular status in a territory. Three cases analyzed in this paper shared this competitive motive. In all cases, competitions around language policy caused by the titular group's attempt to make their language the only state language provoked the non-titular group's resistance. The non-titular group, disappointed by the adoption of the republican language law, tried to create a territorial autonomy in which the non-titular ethnicity would become a majority.

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10 Ibid., p. 21.

11 Gagauz Halki was officially registered as a juridical person on October 26, 1989. The Moldovan Council of Ministers canceled this registration in 1990, when Gagauz activists proclaimed the formation of the Gagauzian Republic directly subordinated to the USSR, bypassing the MSSR. See Archiva Națională a Moldovei (ANM), f. 2848 [Guvernul R.S.S.Moldova Hotărîrea], in. 22, do. 535, pp. 214–216.

12 Tilly, *From Mobilization*, pp. 70, 78.

13 Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 134–136.

14 Ray Taras, "Conclusion: Making Sense of Matrioshka Nationalism," in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 521–525.

*The First Phase: Towards Cultural Autonomy*

The titular and non-titular groups began to confront each other, when the former, dominant in the Lithuanian and Moldovan Supreme Soviets (parliaments), tried to adopt a language law determining not only the official but also the monopolizing status of the titular language. On June 3, 1988, Lithuanian intellectuals organized Sajūdis (Reform Movement of Lithuania) with the slogan of “glasnost, democracy, and sovereignty” in the building of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius.<sup>15</sup> A core proposal of this movement was to recognize Lithuanian as the governmental (official) language, which would be realized by the “Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR on the Use of the State Language of the Lithuanian SSR,” adopted 25 January 1989. Moldovan intellectuals started to follow this Baltic harbinger in September 1988, when sixty-six Moldovan intellectuals published an open letter, requesting a language law to make Moldovan using Roman script<sup>16</sup> the governmental language. This request was realized by the “Law of the Republic of Moldova on the Functioning of the Languages Spoken in the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic,” adopted on August 31, 1989.

In December 1988, both Lithuania and Moldova established special commissions under the aegis of the Supreme Soviets and republican Academies of Science to deliberate the language legislation. Non-titular groups objected immediately. In December 1988, many precinct (*aplinka*<sup>17</sup>) Soviet sessions and regional branches of the Polish Union in Lithuania (Związek Polaków na Litwie, hereafter ZPL) and Social-Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania in Šalčininkai and Vilnius Districts, where the majority of the population were Lithuanian Poles, requested that Polish be bestowed the same status as Lithuanian, as well as constitutional protection for Polish speakers.<sup>18</sup> Local Polish intellectuals, many of whom belonged to these organizations, initiated this movement.

In Moldova, Russian speakers composed the core of the non-titular opposition.<sup>19</sup> In December 1988, members of the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, mainly Russophone intellectuals, established a political organization named

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15 *Lithuanian Way 1* (Vilnius: Lithuanian Reform Movement Sajūdis, 1990), p. 23.

16 Рущу И.Г. Заметки о смутном времени. Кишинев, 1999. С. 1. This action followed Estonia's precedent. Linguistically, Moldovan is hardly differentiated from Romanian, but until 1989, Moldovan was written in Cyrillic script and thus artificially separated from Romanian.

17 Aplinka was a mezzanine territorial unit between district (raion) and village, specific to the Lithuanian SSR. For example, Vilnius District consisted of twenty-seven aplinka, while Šalčininkai – fourteen. *Tarybu Lietuvos enciklopedija* vol. 4 (Vilnius: Vyriausioji enciklopediju redakcija, 1988), pp. 151–152, 545–546.

18 Lietuvos Valstybės Naujasis archyvas (LVNA), f. 42 [Lietuvos Lenkų Sąjungos (LLS) perduodamų dokumentų sąrašas], ap. sąr, b. 92, l. 1.

19 Днестровская Правда. 01.05.1989; 09.05.1989; 25.05.1989.

“Interclub” for the protection of the Russophone population.<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, Interclub activists were recruited from not only Transnistria, but also Gagauzia. Before long, these Gagauzian activists became the torchbearers of the Gagauz autonomous movement.

Along with the activists associated with Interclub, Gagauz Halki intellectuals steadily intensified activities for cultural revival of the Gagauz people from April 1988. However, it was only in May 1989 that the penetration of the concepts of self-determination and minority rights into public awareness induced the Gagauz community to request making Gagauz the official language in Gagauz-dominant districts. Before this moment, the Gagauz community was no more than a subgroup of the “internationalists” opposing Moldovan “nationalism.”

The insignificant percentage of the population with a command of the titular group’s language was a reason that not only Russian-speakers but also Gagauzians and Lithuanian Poles were against the language law and requested to retain the spheres of life in which Russian could be used officially. According to the Soviet Census of 1979, only 0.1 percent of the Gagauz had a command of Moldovan (Romanian) as their first language and 6.3 percent as their second language, while 6.8 percent had a command of Russian as their first language and 68.4 percent as the second.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the number of persons with a command of Russian was much more than that of Moldovan (Romanian). This circumstance was similar to that of the Lithuanian Poles. According to the Soviet Census of 1989, 5.0 percent of Lithuanian Poles had a command of Lithuanian as their first language and 15.5 percent as the second, while 9.2 percent had a command of Russian as their first language and 57.9 percent as the second.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Second Phase: Toward Territorial Autonomy*

Non-titular groups’ opposition to the language law intensified ethnic conflicts. They elaborated a project to build a territorial autonomy for the purpose of strengthening their political voice against titular groups. Of the three cases, Lithuanian Poles acted first in this activity, launching their autonomous project as early as January 1989. This was a reaction to the Language Decree promulgated on January 25, 1989, which disappointed Lithuanian Poles by its lack of legal guarantee of the usage of Polish even in dominantly Polish districts. As a result, the notion of forming a special legal status (autonomous region) to protect their own interests became popular among Lithuanian Poles.<sup>23</sup>

It was at this turning point that the USSR’s Convention of People’s Deputies was convened in May 1989. Autonomists regarded this event as a golden

20 Чего добилось “Единство.” Тирасполь, 1999.

21 Вестник Статистики. 1980. 10. С. 71.

22 1989 metų visuotinių gyventojų surašymo duomenys, I tomas (Vilnius, 1991).

23 Aleksander Srebrakowski, *Polacy w Litewskiej SRR 1944–1989* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2001), p. 299.

opportunity to articulate their minority rights.<sup>24</sup> In this month, a number of territorial units around Vilnius and other city Soviets adopted resolutions demanding territorial autonomy,<sup>25</sup> while Gagauz Halki began to request the creation of their own autonomous republic. On May 21, 1989, Gagauz Halki held a mass meeting in Comrat to request the Moldovan Supreme Soviet and Council of Ministers to introduce the Gagauzian Autonomous SSR as a constituent of the MSSR.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Lithuanian Poles, who did not use the term “republic,” Gagauz Halki underscored that they desired an autonomous “republic,” not an autonomous region. In Transnistria, collective actions for territorial autonomy started several months later, after the political strikes organized against the Moldovan language law did not produce the expected result.<sup>27</sup>

This law, adopted by the Moldovan Supreme Soviet on August 31, 1989, caused protests in Transnistria, Gagauz and other parts of Moldova. After August 21, mainly Russophone employees organized political strikes against the law in large cities, such as Ribnița, Tiraspol, Tighina (Bender), Chișinău, Edineț, Orhei, Belți, and Comrat.<sup>28</sup> Remarkably, in this wave of strikes Transnistrian autonomists created the United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK), selecting Igor Smirnov as its chairman. Although strikes continued until September 22,<sup>29</sup> the Moldovan Supreme Soviet refused to rescind the language law and, unexpectedly for strikers, the protracted standstill of industries began to damage the regional economy.<sup>30</sup> These unsuccessful strikes made their organizers seek a more effective way to secure their interest and rights; territorial autonomy was the answer to this question.<sup>31</sup>

The Unity (Edinstvo), which had developed from the Interclub,<sup>32</sup> did not play an important role in this quest for territorial autonomy. Unity struggled to realize bilingualism in Moldova, requesting to make Russian the language for inter-ethnic communication.<sup>33</sup> This policy is closer to the bilingualism policy pursued by the Soiuz group at the union level.<sup>34</sup> Workers of non-titular back-

24 Днестровская Правда. 05.25.1989.

25 Srebrakowski, *Polacy w Litewskiej*, p. 299.

26 Постановление I-го съезда гагаузского движения “Гагауз халкы.” Комрат, 1989.

27 Днестровская Правда. 10.17.1989.

28 Днестровская Правда. 29.08.1989; Смирнов Игорь. Жить на земле. М., 2001. С. 27.

29 Бабилунга Н. В., Бомешко Б. Г. Приднестровский конфликт: исторические, демографические, политические аспекты. Тирасполь, 1998. С. 23.

30 Смирнов. Жить на земле. С. 29.

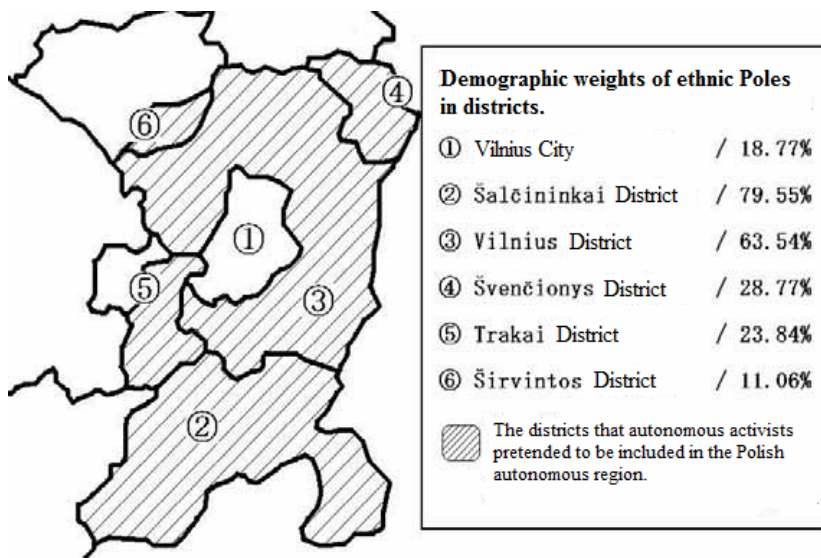
31 Днестровская Правда. 17.10.1989. Igor Smirnov, who continues to be the official leader of Transnistria today, writes in his autobiography that the experience of striking led to the idea of creating an autonomous republic.

32 Unity held its founding meeting on July 8, 1989, at which Interclub liquidated itself to become Unity. Чего добилось “Единство.” С. 2.

33 My interview with Petr Shornikov, writer and former member of the Supreme Soviet of MSSR, in Chișinău on June 21, 2004.

34 The members of Soiuz in Moscow and Unity in Moldova kept close relations and exchanged opinions. My interviews with Iulie Brohin, entrepreneur and former representative of Soi-

**Figure 1. Demographic Weights of Lithuanian Poles in Southeast Lithuania (1989)**



ground, largely Slavic speakers from across Moldova, not necessarily from the left bank, supported Unity.

### REASONS FOR DIVERSIFICATION

As surveyed above, there had been significant resemblances between the three movements, which however began to diverge in mid-1989. This section examines possible reasons for this diversification.

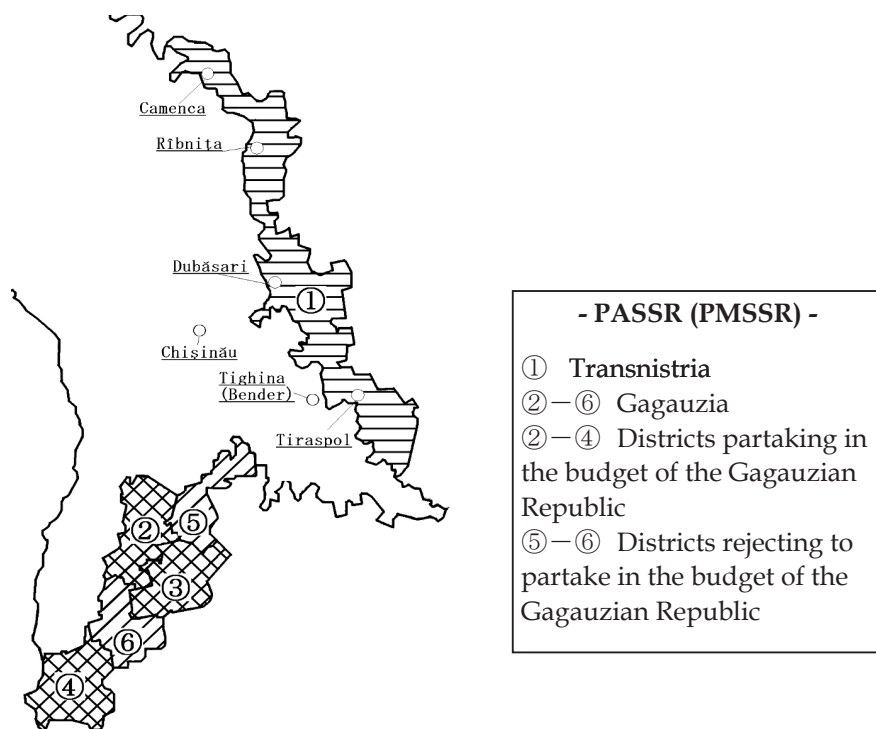
#### *Demography*

Transnistria, Gagauzia, and the Polish Districts of Lithuania (Figure 1) cover approximately 4200, 3600, and 3200 square kilometers respectively. In terms of populations, however, they reveal a tangible difference: Transnistria under Socialism – about 750,000, Gagauzia – 295,000, and Polish Districts of Lithuania – 134,000. Moreover, Transnistria was the most urbanized and had large cities, such as Tiraspol with a population of 202,900, Tighina (Bender) – 144,000, Slobozia – 112,100, Rîbnița – 96,600, Grigoriopol – 54,000, and Camenca – 36,600.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, in Gagauzia even the largest city of Comrat had a population of 26,100, Ceadr-Lunga – 23,200, and Vulcănești – 17,600. The Polish Districts of Lithuania were even more rural; the “cities” of Šalčininkai,

uz, in Moscow on February 02, 2005; with Petr Shornikov in Chișinău on February 12, 2007.

35 Бомешенко Б. Г. Сравнительный анализ национальной структуры населения МАССР и ПМР. Том. 1. Тирасполь, 1993. С. 37.

Figure 2. Transnistria and Gagauzia



Nemenčinė, and Eišišikės had populations of 6,500, 5,600, and 3,800, respectively.<sup>36</sup> The concentrated urban population was very important for organizing a social movement systematically. Lacking this condition, Lithuanian Poles' autonomy movement was defused among precinct (aplinka) Soviets in the Šalčininkai and Vilnius Districts. Counter-factually, it might be possible to assume what could have happened, if Vilnius City, which had belonged to Poland from 1920 to 1940, had played an active role in the Polish autonomous movement. However, Vilnius was severely de-Polonized after the Soviet Army's occupation of Lithuania; ethnic Polish intellectuals left the new capital. Consequently, Lithuanian Poles, as an absolute minority in Vilnius City, were not capable of resisting Sąjūdis, which developed mainly in Vilnius.

The situation was slightly more advantageous for the Gagauzian autonomous movement, which found its social basis in the cities with the demographic dominance of Gagauzians, such as Comrat, Ceadâr-Lunga, and Vulcăneşti. Gagauzian autonomous activists often visited rural districts to consolidate the ethnic community. Not surprisingly, in Transnistria major industrialized cities, such as Tiraspol, Tighina (Bender), Slobozia, and Rîbnîţa, became footholds of the autonomous movement.

The Soviet regime requested from ethnic groups demanding autonomy a certain population size, dense (according to Soviet terminology, "compact")

<sup>36</sup> 1989 metų visuotnių.



inhabitation, and social development. In this sense, Transnistria was the most legitimate but peculiar unit to be granted autonomy. Its peculiarity was that the population was composed of three ethnicities, Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians, all roughly equal in number.

It was a repeatedly questioned issue whether the ethnic Gagauz community had achieved the level that allowed for a new autonomy.<sup>37</sup> Several researchers who worked in Moldova and other union republics answered this question affirmatively.<sup>38</sup> For example, Mikhail Guboglo, a Gagauzian ethnologist working at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR's Academy of Sciences, argued that the Gagauz had sufficiently developed ethnic peculiarities, a relatively large population (about 160,000), which moreover lived in densely populated areas, the potential for economic independence, and a political desire for self-determination.<sup>39</sup>

Gagauzian activists argued that their community fulfilled the requirements for autonomy even more than the existing autonomous republics. According to a report submitted by a special commission to the Moldovan Supreme Soviet, the alleged 3600 square kilometers of the anticipated Gagauzian autonomous territory was larger than the 3000 square kilometers of the Adjara Autonomous Republic of the Georgian SSR, and the regional population of Gagauzia amounted to 295,000, larger than 278,000 of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of the Azerbaijan SSR.<sup>40</sup> This comparison, however, was not entirely fair. To make the Gagauzian territory as large as 3600 square kilometers, one had to include all five districts of southern Moldova (Figure 2). If one regarded these districts as composing the Gagauzian territory, however, ethnic Gagauzians composed only 44 percent of its total population, which did not confirm the assertion that the Gagauz lived densely in that territory. Other sources stated that the demographic weight of Gagauzians in the future autonomous Gagauzia would amount to approximately 86 percent.<sup>41</sup> However, to achieve this density, the autonomous Gagauzia would have to be smaller than 1900 square kilometers.

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37 Советская Молдавия. 01.02.1990; О создании Гагаузской Автономной Советской Социалистической Республики в составе Молдавской ССР (Уточненный вариант). Комрат, 1989.

38 Гришев И.А. Экспертное заключение по вопросу о создании национальной государственности гагаузов в СССР. М., 28.12.1989; Каракаш И.И. Политико-правовые основания образования государственности гагаузского народа. Одесса, 30.10.1989.

39 Губогло М.Н. Истошин И.Ю. Экспертное заключение № 14043 по вопросу о создании национальной государственности гагаузов в СССР. М., 30.11.1989.

40 Материалы комиссии президиума верховного совета МССР по изучению запросов народных депутатов СССР и других обращений по созданию автономии Гагаузского народа. Комрат, 1990.

41 Тадевосян Э.В. Экспертное заключение по вопросу о создании национальной государственности гагаузов в СССР. М., 1989.

*Outside Co-ethnics and Protectors*

Another important factor for the diversification of autonomous movements was the non-titular groups' relations with their compatriots (co-ethnics) and protectors beyond state borders.

The history of the Rzeczpospolita and interwar Poland (1920–40) resulted in the existence of a significant number of Polish speakers in the border territories of Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania. In 1940, when Poland was partitioned by the USSR and Germany, a large number of Poles were incorporated into the USSR. However, the post-communist Polish government was quite unwilling to commit to the human rights issues of Polish minorities beyond its Eastern borders.<sup>42</sup> Among others, the Polish government regarded the Lithuanian Poles as a Sovietized Diaspora, any support of which might possibly benefit the Soviet Union. This apprehension intensified when the Lithuanian Poles requested the creation of the so-called "Eastern Polish SSR" in the boundaries of the USSR, instead of pursuing the reunification with Poland. Boleslav Daškevic, an ethnic Polish intellectual in Lithuania, maintains that the Lithuanian Poles are not Poles, but a sort of "Polonia," which means Poles in Diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

The northwestern part of Belarus, with Grodno as its center, had the largest Polish population in the Soviet Union. The number of ethnic Poles in Belarus amounted to more than 500,000, twice the number of ethnic Poles in Lithuania.<sup>44</sup> Ethnic Poles in Belarus launched their movement for cultural autonomy earlier than their Lithuanian co-ethnics. In July 1988, Belarusian Poles requested to increase Polish schools and Polish-speaking mass media, and to import more books and newspapers from their "homeland."<sup>45</sup> However, Belarusian Poles were not ardent for territorial autonomy. The Belarusian authorities were less nationalistic than the Lithuanian authorities, and therefore did not provoke tensions with the non-titular population.

The Gagauz inhabit the border between Ukraine and Moldova. They originated from the immigrants in South Ukraine and Bessarabia during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The Russian Empire tried to colonize these regions promptly by inviting Gagauzian and Bulgarian colonists.<sup>46</sup> Unlike Lithuanian Poles, the Gagauz have never had co-ethnic foreign governments as their patron. Linguistically, the Gagauz are close to Turkic nations, while

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42 Sato Keiji, "Soren makki niokeru minzoku mondai no matoryoshuka kouzou bunseki: Ritoania porando jin mondai no keisu sutadei [The 'Matrioshka' Structure of Ethnic Relations in the Last Period of the Soviet Union: A Case Study of Lithuanian Poles]," *Suravv kenkyu* [*Slavic Studies*] 54 (2007), pp. 123–124.

43 My interview with Boleslav Daskevich, Administrative Director of Šalčininkai region self-government and former member of central committee of Šalčininkai District Soviet, in Šalčininkai, Lithuania, on February 1, 2007.

44 Srebrakowski, *Polacy w Litewskiej*, p. 123.

45 LVNA, f. 10 [Lietuvos Persitvarkymo Sąjūdžio 1988–1990m. nuolatinio saugojimo dokumentai], ap. sąr, b. 25, l. 85–86.

46 *Булгар Степан*, История и культура Гагаузов. Комрат, 2006.

they have been Christianized by Orthodox Church. In other words, the Gagauz could expect support neither from the Turkic nor Muslim world in their opposition to the assimilative policy of the Moldovan government. This isolation made the Gagauz tough and realistic, and they eventually obtained territorial autonomy in December 1994. Stepan Kuroglo states that, for the lack of any co-ethnic political entities in the world, the Gagauz feared their ethnic extinction and therefore wished to have a political entity for their future.<sup>47</sup>

Although Gagauzians inhabit in southern districts of Odesa Oblast of Ukraine, the mainland of the Gagauz is Moldova. Only 20 percent of the whole Gagauz population lives in Ukraine, while 80 percent lives in Moldova. In contrast, 48 percent of the all ethnic Poles of the western part of the Soviet Union live in Belarus, 32 percent – in Ukraine, and only 20 percent – in Lithuania.<sup>48</sup> This demographic distribution implies that even if ethnic Poles failed in creating territorial autonomy in Lithuania, their ethnic bulk, inhabiting less nationalistic Belarus, would survive. The Gagauz in Moldova could not but feel more serious responsibility for the whole transnational Gagauz community than their co-ethnics in Ukraine. Gagauzian intellectuals thought that Moldova was their last fortress.<sup>49</sup>

Transnistrians justified their secessionism by regionalist (not nationalist) ideology. The Transnistrian population is composed of 39.9 percent of Moldovans, 28.3 percent of Ukrainians, 25.4 percent of Russians, and 6.4 percent of others.<sup>50</sup> The ethnic compositions of the three largest cities, more relevant than the countryside for autonomous movement, were as follows.

### Ethnic Compositions of Large Cities of Transnistria

	Moldovan	Russian	Ukrainian	Others
Tiraspol	34.1	30.1	28.0	7.8
Tighina (Bender)	29.1	43.3	32.2	8.8
Ribnița	31.8	18.6	44.7	4.9

Source: *Грызлов В.Ф. Непризнанная республика. Том 1. М., 1997. С. 37.*

Thus, even in Tiraspol Russians did not compose the largest group. Moreover, citizens of these cities were more mindful of class, not ethnic, divisions.<sup>51</sup> This is why the autonomous leaders raised the slogan of “internationalism”

47 My interview with Stepan Kuroglo, writer and former member of central committee of Gagauz Halki, in Chișinău on June 9, 2004.

48 Srebrakowski, *Polacy w Litewskiej*, p. 123.

49 Gagauzian intellectuals in Ukraine mainly lived in Odesa, spatially separated from Moldova. This made it difficult for Gagauzian intellectuals in Ukraine and Moldova to cooperate. Interview with Bulgar, writer and former representative of Gagauz Halki, in Chișinău on June 19, 2004.

50 *Бабилунга, Бомешко. Приднестровский конфликт. С. 34.*

51 *Днестровская Правда. 11.05.1989; 13.05.1989.*

and “anti-nationalism.”<sup>52</sup> Because of this ethnic composition, Transnistria potentially has two protectors, Russia and Ukraine. This situation is particularly threatening for Moldova since a significant portion of Transnistrians have obtained Russian or Ukrainian citizenship, which means that Russia and Ukraine may pretend to “protect their citizens” in cases of human rights violation. Transnistrian actors (both authorities and opposition) have been in position to use left-bank Moldovans tactfully in their interactions with the Right Bank. For example, Moldovanist<sup>53</sup> historians in Transnistria contribute their papers to the Moldovan Communists’ journals dedicated to Moldovanist ideology.

It is difficult not to notice the advantageous situation of Transnistria. Lithuanian Poles faced a reluctant protector (Polish government) and a reluctant larger community of co-ethnics in Belarus, who were satisfied with the less nationalistic government. Gagauzians had become ardent autonomists because they could not count on their co-ethnics in Ukraine, but they do not have any foreign protector. Transnistria could potentially count on Russia and Ukraine in its confrontation with Moldova and continues to exploit the population’s ethnic ties with the neighboring countries.

### *Industrial Potential*

The local economy of the Polish districts of Lithuania was based on food processing, distillation, and baking in Šalčininkai, dairy in Nemenčinė, as well as the leather industry in Eišišikės.<sup>54</sup> In the early period of the autonomy movement, the Soviets ruled by Lithuanian Poles had already suffered from budgetary deficits, though this was a universal phenomenon for all local budgets of Lithuania. In 1990–92, many collective and state farms faced bankruptcy in Šalčininkai District, failing in the adaptation to market economy.<sup>55</sup> The proximity of Polish districts to Vilnius City forced small local industries to be involved in unequal competition with the capital’s industries. According to documents of the Šalčininkai Aplinka Soviet, the Soviet anticipated revenue of 11,500 rubles from collective farms in 1990, but this estimate had lost meaning by the end of 1989, because the collective farms paid no rubles to the local budget.<sup>56</sup> All localities of Šalčininkai and Vilnius Districts shared this dismal fate. The industrial and budgetary collapse was the real reason for the failure of the Polish autonomous movement.

The Gagauzian economy relied on agricultural industry, too. Most “cities” were entrepôts of agricultural products. There were wineries and dairies

52 Днестровская Правда. 04.07.1990.

53 Moldovanism is a position in history, linguistics, and other humanities that argues for the distinctiveness of Moldovans from Romanians. Vladimir Voronin came to power, hoisting this ideology.

54 *Tarybu Lietuvos enciklopedija* (Vilnius: Vyriausioji enciklopediju redakcija, 1988).

55 My fieldwork and interviews with local inhabitants in Šalčininkai on February 1, 2007.

56 Lietuvos Respublikos Alytaus apygardos Archyvas (LRAA), f. 2057 [Lietuvos Respublikos Šalčininkų rajono, Šalčininkų aplinkės taryba ir viršaitis], ap. 1, b. 5, l. 21.

in Comrat, and wineries and a cigarette factory in Ceadîr-Lunga.<sup>57</sup>

Transnistria had strong industry, incomparable with Southeast Lithuania and Gagauzia. Transnistria as an unrecognized state has survived to this day because of this industrial potential. Having no more than 13 and 17 percent of the territory and population of the Moldovan SSR, Transnistria accounts for 37 percent of Moldovan industry<sup>58</sup> and 90 percent of the power supply.<sup>59</sup> Steel production has been the leading industry of Transnistria. The Moldovan Steel Works in Rîbnița started to work in January 1985, equipped with newest technologies at that time, and continues to contribute to the state budget by earning foreign currency. Other leading industrial giants were power plants located in Dubăsari and Kucurgan. As mentioned above, they used to supply 90 percent of Moldova's power and continue to respond to the needs of the right bank. The Transnistrian authorities often use this advantage as a card in negotiations with Moldova. There were other industries that were internationally competitive and capable of earning foreign currency in Transnistria: for instance, the leather industry (mainly producing shoes) in Bender, and cognac distillery and winery in Tiraspol.

Transnistria exported its products to CIS countries, especially neighboring Ukraine. Even today, Ukraine desperately needs Transnistrian industry.<sup>60</sup> Transnistria's economic ties with Ukraine, Russia, and other CIS countries favor its de facto independence. Two international railways, three trunk gas pipelines, two international highways pierce Transnistria.<sup>61</sup> It was extremely disadvantageous for Moldova that Transnistria is potentially capable of intercepting transportation from Russia and Odesa's port. Actually, in August 1991, when the Moldovan government arrested Igor Smirnov and Stepan Topal, the Gagauz leader, the Women's Association in Transnistria blocked the two international routes and forced the Moldovan government to compromise.

### *Changes in the Main Actors*

As described above, national intellectuals guided the autonomous movements in all three regions at an early stage. However, initiators of the movements gradually changed. In Lithuania, deputies of the Šalčininkai and Vilnius District Soviets and ethnic Polish members of the CPSU in these districts advocated for territorial autonomy.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, ethnic Polish intellectuals, who

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57 Советская молдавия: краткая энциклопедия. Кишинёв, 1982. С. 672.

58 *Бабилунга, Бомешко. Приднестровский конфликт.* С. 19.

59 Another source states that 98.5 percent of power came from Transnistria. Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, "Nation-building and ethnic mobilization in the Soviet successor states: The case of Moldova," *Center for International Studies* (St. Louis University of Missouri, 1993), p. 16.

60 This was a reason that Leonid Kuchma, the former Ukrainian president, was reluctant to solve the Transnistrian conflict.

61 [<http://www.olvia.idknet.com/pmr.htm>], 11.11.2007.

62 Sato, "Soren makki niokeru minzoku mondai," pp. 115-116.

largely belonged to the ZPL, bet on cultural autonomy. In addition, the activities of ZPL, the largest and most trusted party among the masses of Lithuanian Poles, were limited to Vilnius City. In contrast to Transnistria, few laborers, industrialists, and collective farm chairmen participated in the movement, because of the undeveloped industry in the ethnic Polish districts.

Gagauzia showed a sign of the transfer of hegemony;<sup>63</sup> since 1988 to mid-1989 leading members of Gagauz Halki were intellectuals, but later the local branch of the trade union, headed by Stepan Topol, began to play a leading role, when Gagauz Halki expanded its membership.<sup>64</sup> The first assembly of Gagauz plenipotentiaries, held in November 1989, declared the formation of the Gagauz Autonomous SSR as a constituent of the Moldovan SSR and selected Topal as the speaker of the Supreme Soviet of this new autonomous republic.

In Transnistria, laborers in heavy industry, who were members of the trade union, played a leading role from the beginning of the autonomous movement.<sup>65</sup> During the strikes in August-September 1989, the newly born OSTK established its influence on the left-bank population. During the “founding” elections in November 1990, OSTK candidates enjoyed significant opportunities to be elected as local and republican (Moldovan) deputies in Transnistria.<sup>66</sup>

Though support for the autonomist candidates was universal for all three regions, only OSTK could keep the public on its side. The Šalčininkai and Vilnius District Soviets lost public support after the January Incident (*Sausio įvykiai*) of 1991, in which fourteen citizens were killed by the Soviet troops near the Vilnius TV tower. Not only Lithuanians, but even Russian and Belarusian minorities of Lithuania stood against this brutal action, and Lithuanian Poles no longer found it advantageous to support the union authorities. Gagauz Halki lost public support, approximately when the Soviet Union collapsed, because it could not “pay any reward” to its supporters. After the local elections in 1990, Gagauz Halki and Gagauzian autonomy could not meet the public’s expectations for a higher living standard, because of its poor budget. In the same fateful months, Transnistria succeeded in consolidating its regional budget to promote material conditions of the population. The active victimiza-

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63 Sato Keiji, “Soren makki niokeru Gagauzu-jin minzoku jichi seihu womeguru shomondai [The Issue of the Gagauz Autonomous Government in the Late Soviet Union],” *Surabu kenkyu* [*Slavic Studies*] 53 (2006), pp. 317–321.

64 Резолюция митинга представителей трудящихся города Комрата и южных районов Молдавской ССР, проведенного по инициативе исполкома народного движения “Гагауз халкы” (“Гагаузский народ”), в соответствии с решением №6 исполкома Комратского городского Совета народных депутатов. Комрат, 04.06.1989.

65 Днестровская Правда. 19.08.1989; 24.08.1989; 16.09.1989.

66 The November elections were held to form the Transnistrian state institutions after the declaration of “independence” on September 2, 1990. 81.3 percent of the OSTK candidates were elected. Днестровская Правда. 29.11.1990; 21.11.1990.

tion<sup>67</sup> of the casualties in the conflict in Dubăsari in November 1990 unified Transnistrians against the Moldovan authorities and Popular Front.

### *Budgetary Separatism*

According to the testimony concerning “anti-governmental” movements by Lithuanian Poles at the Vilnius prosecutor’s office, Henrikas Kneziš, vice-president of the Vilnius Gas, the ethnic Polish district Soviets hardly had influence on local workers and industrialists in their districts and, therefore, faced difficulties in composing local budgets. A stenograph of a session of the Šalčininkai District Soviet, held at the beginning of 1991, confirms this situation; the association of medics in the district was ready for strikes if the delay of wages continued.<sup>68</sup> Another deputy remarked that the liquidation of wage delays will consume the whole budget allocated for the period by September 1991.<sup>69</sup> Thus, as early as 1991, the Šalčininkai District Soviet faced a grave budgetary crisis. It is conventional knowledge that the autonomous movement of Lithuanian Poles collapsed after the attempted August coup of 1991, because its activists were accused of supporting the coup.<sup>70</sup> However, my survey of local budgets reveals that the Polish autonomous movement, sooner or later, would have come to an end for lack of money, irrespective of the political event in Moscow.

The Gagauz autonomists self-proclaimed the establishment of the Gagauzian ASSR in November 1989, and then “raised” its status to the republic of Gagauzia in August 1990. Behind this façade, however, Gagauzia suffered a deep budgetary crisis, no less serious than the one that Lithuanian Poles faced. The republican budget depended on donations from industrialists sympathizing with the idea of Gagauz autonomy,<sup>71</sup> but the government could not formalize these donations as state taxes, collectable in a systematic manner. As a result, some entrepreneurs paid “taxes” to both the Moldovan and Gagauzian governments, while others only paid the Moldovan government.

To exploit the industrial potential of the region for consolidating its budget, the Transnistrian government attempted to realize an economic secession from the Right Bank beginning in the earliest months of the autonomous movement. For example, there emerged an idea to combine Transnistria with Odesa

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67 It was a coincidence that the three victims of this incident represented the ethnicities composing Transnistria (Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian). The authorities organized their state funerals. After the military conflict in 1992, Transnistrian historians published a pamphlet on this event: *Бабилунга Н.В., Бомешко Б.Г.* Дубоссары: кровотокающая рана Приднестровья. Тирасполь, 1993.

68 Lietuvos Respublikos Generalinės prokuratūros organizuotų nusikaltimų ir kuropcijos tyrimo skyrius, *Baudžiamoji byla Nr. 09-2-060-93*, Tomas. 3, p. 169.

69 Lietuvos Respublikos Generalinės, Tomas. 3, p. 170.

70 Lietuvos Respublikos Generalinės, Tomas 6, p. 268.

71 Interview with Olga Radova, writer and former representative of the Gagauz Women’s Association, in Comrat on February 4, 2004.

Oblast of Ukraine to create a free economic zone immediately after the OSTK took shape.<sup>72</sup> In his autobiography, Igor Smirnov also confirms the existence of a plan for economic secession as early as August 1989. Economists from Moscow helped to elaborate this plan during the August strikes.<sup>73</sup> This plan noted that the first step toward economic independence was to create a central bank owned by the Transnistrian government.<sup>74</sup> In February 1991, the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet decided to organize a central bank of Transnistria and, at the same time, to form a regional budget separate from the Moldovan one.<sup>75</sup> The Moldovan government checked this move for a while, but in April 1991, the Transnistrian authorities created a governmental bank as a regional branch of Moscow's Agroprombank.<sup>76</sup> The budgetary separation was completed after the violent conflict in Tighina (Bender) in September 1992.<sup>77</sup>

Gagauzian autonomy tried to follow the Transnistrian model of budgetary and financial secession. In August 1991, Gagauz president S. Topal visited Moscow and asked the directorate of Agroprombank, which already had opened its Transnistrian branch, to repeat this effort in Gagauzia.<sup>78</sup> This proposal was realized in mid-1992. The next step of the Transnistrian model was to separate the state budget from the Moldovan one. For the budget year of 1993–94, the Gagauz government tried to create its own budget, based on the three districts of Comrat, Vulcănești, and Ceadâr-Lunga (Figure 2). This attempt was stillborn,<sup>79</sup> however. Since the Gagauzian government could not pay wages to public servants, Ceadâr-Lunga's governor, Dmitri Kroitor, decided to secede from the Gagauzian budget as early as the beginning of 1994. After the Ceadâr-Lunga District seceded, the Moldovan government allotted generous financial support to Kroitor and resolved the budgetary problem in Ceadâr-Lunga. This is one of the reasons that the Gagauz authorities found no alternative but to accept the Moldovan government's plan of autonomization of Gagauzia as a constituent of Moldova in December 1994.

## CONCLUSION

This paper scrutinized the reasons for the differing outcomes of the autonomist movements in Transnistria, Gagauzia, and the Lithuanian Polish districts. An important finding is that we should pay much more attention to Transnistria's economic secession, accelerated during 1989–91, in contrast

72 Днестровская Правда. 16.09.1989.

73 Смирнов. Жизнь на земле. С. 59.

74 Днестровская Правда. 28.12.1990.

75 АНМ, ф. 2848, ин. 22, до. 535, пп. 216, 217; ф. 2848, ин. 22, до. 537, пп. 138–141; Днестровская Правда. 09.02.1991.

76 Днестровская Правда. 12.04.1991.

77 My interviews with Petr Shornikov in Chişinău on February 12, 2007.

78 Днестровская Правда. 15.08.1991.

79 Interview with S. Bulgar.



to Gagauzia and the Lithuanian Polish districts. Researchers seem to have been too focused on the political and legal processes that resulted in the break up of the Soviet Union, and on the problems of conflict regulation that followed. However, the real issue was economic self-sustainability. Among the three cases, only Transnistria was blessed with this condition, and it was only Transnistria that the host government found no other way but to reintegrate by force. The Lithuanian Poles and Gagauz proved to be more negotiable because of their economic weakness.

Researches tend to think that since the autonomous movements by Lithuanian Poles and Gagauzians were driven by their ethnic grievances, the host governments could contain them by guaranteeing their minority rights. This interpretation is questionable. As this paper demonstrates, the Gagauz leaders had exactly the same plan for budgetary secession as their Transnistrian colleagues had. The Gagauz leaders could be contained only because they lacked the resources to organize effective collective actions aimed at this plan. Something similar can be said for Lithuanian Poles.

Another, non-economic factor that determined the fate of the separatist regions was the existence or non-existence of the actors and institutions to control and direct economic resources, if they existed at all, toward collective targets. In this sense, Transnistria was in a more advantageous position than Gagauzia and the Lithuanian Polish districts, because only Transnistria had loyal industrialists, reliable outside protectors and co-ethnics, demographic balance among the ethnicities composing the state, and operative leaders capable of reacting to the titular group's offences in a timely manner (the "opportunity" factor according to Tilly and Tarrow's definition). Overall, economic potential and a well-organized political regime have determined the feasibility and viability of the de facto independence of secessionist regions.