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THE ELECTION RESULTS IN GAGAUZIA - FAILURE OF CHISINAU?

Policy Brief



The Institute for
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POLICY BRIEF

THE ELECTION RESULTS IN GAGAUZIA - FAILURE OF CHISINAU?

Veaceslav Berbeca



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IDIS „Viitorul” is a research, training and public initiative institution, which works in several areas related to economic analysis, governance, political research, strategic planning and knowledge management. IDIS serves as a joint platform bringing together young intellectuals concerned with the success of the transition towards market economy and an open society in Republic of Moldova. The Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) „Viitorul” is the legal successor of Fundatia Viitorul (Viitorul Foundation) and, overall, preserves the traditions, objectives and principles of the foundation among which: building democratic institutions and developing a spirit of effective responsibility among policy makers, civil servants and citizens of our country, strengthening civil society and criticism, promoting the freedoms and values of an open, modern and pro-European society.

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	6
CANDIDATES FOR GOVERNOR	7
THE MAIN ASPECTS OF THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN	10
GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN	12
POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS	14
CONCLUSIONS	17



INTRODUCTION

On March 22nd, elections were held for the post of governor of Gagauzia – a function initially coveted by 12 candidates. About 58.1% of the total number of people registered on the electoral rolls showed up at the polling stations. Following the count, Irina Vlah obtained about 51% of the votes of the Gagauz region’s residents, being elected as governor of the region for a term of four years.

The 2015 elections for governor of Gagauzia have been followed with great interest by politicians from Chisinau, Moldovan diplomatic missions and political commentators. This interest stems from the fact that the relationship between Chisinau and Comrat has been quite tense in the recent years, Formuzal, the governor of the Gagauzia region, having a special role in this conflict.

The term of the current governor coming to an end, the political programmes and intentions of the candidates with the best chances to win in these elections are of particular interest. Perhaps, the main question that those who are following closely the election results ask themselves is related to the actions of the future governor. Will the new governor continue the policy of Formuzal who has been in open conflict with Chisinau during his second term, as well as will the members of the People’s Assembly, or on the contrary, will choose the path of cooperation? Will the geopolitical factor persist in the relations between Chisinau and Comrat or the focus will be on solving the social and economic problems of the residents of the region?

The interest in these elections is reflected also in the record number of 12 registered candidates who have announced their participation in these elections. For comparison, in the 1995 elections four competitors ran for governor; in 1999- 6 candidates, in 2002-

5 candidates, when after repeated elections due to invalidation of the election results, there were only 3 competitors; in 2006- 4 candidates and in 2010 - only 3. The large number of competitors in this election could be explained by various electoral engineering in which different candidates are assigned specific roles in the process. In fact, some candidates with chances of victory, without giving names, said that some contestants had been placed in that campaign in order to disperse as much as possible the votes, thus acting in favour of a certain candidate for governor.

In this article, we focused on the campaign and electoral programmes of the candidates with the highest chances to win the elections. Despite the fact that after interviews with local and national experts and discussions with the residents of the autonomous region, it was clear that only two competitors - Irina Vlach and Nicolai Dudoglo - had real chances to win the elections, we expanded the number of candidates whom we observed and spoke with.

Obviously, mention should be made that the choice was dictated by the opinion of the experts and politicians from Chisinau and the autonomous region regarding the chances of candidates. Accordingly, we focused more on the most important candidates who had announced their intention to stand for election to the office of governor. This approach is explained by the fact that some competitors could abandon the electoral race in favour of those with higher chances of winning the elections. For example, Oleg Caicos withdrew in favour of Nicolai Dudoglo, while Irina Vlah has offered to Sergei Buzadji to “pull the efforts together and participate in the elections in a united team.” Finally, Buzadji accepted the invitation, making common cause with Irina Vlah in the governor elections.



CANDIDATES FOR GOVERNOR

The Central Election Commission of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia registered 12 candidates for the governor elections. After Oleg's Caicos decision to withdraw in favour of Nicolai Dudoglo and Sergei's Buzadji choice to support Irina Vlach, the number of candidates reduced to 10. In the following, we will give a brief overview of the most important candidates.

Irina Vlach was from the onset credited with the highest chance to win the governor elections. Vlach had been a constant presence on the PCRМ parliamentary elections lists on eligible places. Thus, from the 39th place on the 2005 electoral list she was moved to the 8th place in 2014. After the parliamentary elections from November last year, Vlach said she was quitting the PCRМ parliamentary faction, arguing that she was representing the interests of the Gagauz people who had massively voted for the left-wing parties and therefore could not accept the decision of the communists to cooperate with the pro-European parties. Subsequently, she quit PCRМ and became an independent MP. Irina Vlach confessed that she had always promoted the idea of rapprochement with the Russian Federation and accession to the Russia - Belarus - Kazakhstan Customs Union. Thus, after the swing in the communists' position, which meant working with the pro-European parties, quitting the party became imminent; otherwise Vlach wouldn't have been credible to the Gagauz electorate.

All these actions seem to have been taken as a result of the poor results - only 12.4% - that the communists obtained in the parliamentary elections in the autonomous region. Also, the PCRМ idea of cooperation with the pro-European parties would have significantly diminished Vlach's chances to be elected as governor. It is interesting to note that Vlach's decision to

quit the PCRМ ranks was not too severely criticized by the party leader. However, Voronin took Vlach's step as a great betrayal.

Irina Vlach enjoyed support by the socialists and also by Formuzal, the already ex- governor of the region. Also, the Russian factor was evident in the rhetoric and electoral campaign of this candidate.

The fact is that the results of the elections from March 22nd were a premiere in the governor elections. Thus, for the first time a woman was elected in this important function, which shattered the stereotype expressed by many politicians and experts that a woman had no chance of winning the election for governor.

Nicolai Dudoglo was one of the favourites in the governor elections from March 22nd. He has served as mayor of Comrat from 2004 until 2014 and is currently member of Parliament on the lists of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM). He is one of the most experienced politicians in the Gagauz region, having participated in several elections for the office of governor. The 2015 elections was his third experience in which he had the worst performance. In the 2006 and 2010 governor elections he reached the second round after obtaining about one third of the votes in the first round. In the elections from March 22nd, he obtained approximately 19.05% of the total votes. Although traditionally Dudoglo came second in the first round, the number of votes cast for Irene Vlach was enough to elect her as governor in the first round.

Nicolai Dudoglo participated in these elections as independent candidate, suspending his PDM membership during the election campaign. We are

reminding you that between Formuzal and Nicolai Dudoglo there have always been conflicts in recent years caused by their rivalry in running for governor, but also because of the support the former mayor of Comrat got from the Democrats. We can conclude that Irina's Vlah victory put an end to the confrontation between Formuzal and Dudoglo in Gagauzia. Vlah can be considered Formuzal's successor, taking over the sceptre of power from the former governor who had been for a long time cornered by Chisinau.¹ Dudoglo's strategy proved a false stake, as he gradually lost positions, becoming repudiated in Gagauzia². Perhaps the politicians from Chisinau have tried to compensate in some way the difficult situation of Dudoglo, who seemed not to matter in the politics of the autonomous region, by propelling him into the top 10 on the electoral list in the parliamentary elections from November 30th 2014.

Valeri Ianioglo, another promising candidate, obtained about 7.96% of the votes coming third in the election race. Ianioglo is part of the old guard of the Comrat administration. He has served as first deputy governor in 1999-2003, when Dmitri Croitor was governor of the autonomous region of Gagauzia. Since 2007 and up until present, Ianioglo has held the same position during Formuzal's mandate, which demonstrates that his activity was closely linked to that of the bashkan. In 2012, Formuzal nominated Ianioglo as one of his team's candidates for governor. Moreover, the ex-governor said several times that he would hold primary elections after the American model in order to choose the candidate of his team for the bashkan elections. However, starting with 2013, the relations between Formuzal and Ianioglo have deteriorated significantly. One of the main reasons is that Formuzal, working on his political project, did not see any of the Gagauz executives as part of his political programme. Formuzal failed because of his political ambitions and authoritarian character to create a robust team with a strong candidate to win the elections. Finally, Valeri Ianioglo announced his intention to run for governor, being supported by some of the members

of the executive in office, including Nikolai Stoyanov, vice-governor of the autonomous region.

Alexandr Stoianoglo was seen by some representatives of the Gagauz region as an alternative candidate to his main competitors. In other words, he was considered a person who can give a fresh impetus to the political processes in the autonomous region. In the elections from March 22nd, this competitor obtained approximately 4.97% of the votes. Stoianoglo had a very successful career in the prosecution, holding the position of deputy Prosecutor General of the Republic of Moldova in 2001-2007. He ran for governor in the 2006 elections. In the period of 2009-2014 he has been member of the Moldovan Parliament on the PDM ticket. At the beginning of 2015, he quit the ranks of PDM, considering that not belonging to a party can be an advantage in the governor elections, taking into account the specifics of the Gagauz region. Also, Stoianoglo motivated his decision to quit the party by his vision related to the Gagauz region that was different from that of the PDM. One of Stoianoglo's weaknesses in this election was that he had got involved in the election campaign rather late and therefore he did not have enough time to impose himself across the Gagauz region. Also, the candidate confronted with the problem of lack of staff to be able to organize and promote his electoral programme in the areas of the region. Unlike other candidates with real chances to win the elections, Stoianoglo was not supported by any faction, party or interest group.

Dmitri Croitor is the only candidate who has previously held this position. In the elections from March 22nd he managed to gather about 6.2% of the total number of valid votes. To remind you, Croitor became governor after the 1999 elections. Later on, in 2002 he resigned as governor of Gagauzia after a conflict with the central authorities. He had the support of a team including the controversial chairman of the Gagauz People's Assembly, Dmitry Konstantinov, and other Gagauz parliament deputies as Ivan Burgudji and Serghei Compoieş. His figure has appeared in the context in which the Moldovan socialist leaders have decided to support the candidacy of Irina Vlah to the detriment of the position

¹ <http://www.politicon.md/alegerile-din-gagauzia-consolidarea-periferiei-si-slabirea-centrului>

² Ibidem

of the socialists' territorial organization in the Gagauz region which originally announced its support for Serghei Cimpoieș. Finally, the organization has decided to support Dmitri Croitor in the governor elections.

Apart from the above-mentioned candidates, the following competitors have run for governor of the Gagauz autonomous region: Ruslan Garba, Oleg Garizan, Serghei Chernev, Ilia Anastasov and Leonid Dobrov.



THE MAIN ASPECTS OF THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The elections for governor of the region are organised in accordance with the local law on the election of the Bashkan of Gagauzia passed by the People's Assembly in September 1998. In this context, we would like to draw your attention to two of the provisions of this document which are in contradiction with the national legislation, thus being a subject of discussions during the election campaign. First of all, it refers to the Article 13 of this document which sets out the restrictions on the exercise of the voting rights. Thus, under paragraph 1, letter C of this law, the persons sentenced to imprisonment after delivery of the final decision by the court have no right to vote. This provision is contrary to the international agreements to which Moldova is a party (the European Convention on Human Rights). Neither the Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova provides for such a restriction. Therefore, this is a violation of the national law.

Another problem that we took notice of refers to the way the electoral lists are made. Thus, Article 43, para.1 of the local law establishes that the electoral lists are made by the municipalities for each polling station separately. The Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova provides in the Article 39, para. 1 that the voter lists shall be made based on the State Registrar of Voters. Such an approach enables the authorities in the autonomous region to manipulate with the number of voters depending on the elections and certain interests in the region. Mayors can thus exclude the people who have left for abroad from the list in order to obtain convincing results of the Gagauz people's participation in the voting.

The billboards and other promotional instruments of the electoral contestants on the streets and at major intersections of the Gagauz towns create the first

impression about the methods used by the candidates to convince the voters to vote for them. Each candidate has tried to emphasize the advantages and strengths designed to propel them in the struggle for people's votes.

Obviously, the billboards were a luxury for the contestants of this campaign and their presence in large numbers in public places gives an indication of the financial potential of the candidates. In fact, the candidates with the highest chances to win, with few exceptions, were the most present in the busiest places of the towns of the Gagauz autonomy through street displays and other forms of electoral propaganda.

The first thing in the candidates' electoral message that attracts the attention is the projection of the image of a state or certain politicians in the candidates' electoral message. Thus, Irina Vlah used in her electoral advertising the image of Russian politicians such as, Sergei Naryshkin, chairman of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and Valentina Matviyenko, chairman of the Council of the Russian Federation. Also, Irina Vlah appears on the electoral advertisements flanked by the socialist deputies- Igor Dodon and Zinaida Greceanii. Mention should be made that in the parliamentary elections from November 30th, the Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM) won the biggest number of the votes in the autonomous region - 57.10%. In this context, we are reminding you that the socialists projected the image of Vladimir Putin on their electoral promotional materials, which strongly influenced the behaviour of the people in the Gagauz autonomy with respect to PSRM. Thus, once this image was imprinted in the consciousness of the Gagauz electorate, the purpose of the image of the socialist

leaders on Irina's Vlah electoral promotional materials was to demonstrate the Kremlin support for Irina Vlah.

The situation is similar in the case of Nicolai Dudoglo. The candidate has used in his election materials the image of Vladimir Homeriki – a person close to Vladimir Putin- against the Kremlin background. This aimed at demonstrating that Nicolai Dudoglo is supported by important people from the team of the Russian President Putin. Homeriki's support for Dudoglo has been extensively discussed in the media of the autonomous region, which pointed to the fact that Homeriki had expressed support for Nicolai Dudoglo on his behalf. Mention should be made that the Russian official had attended the launching event of Nicolai's Dudoglo election campaign for governor.

However, in his promotional materials, Nicolai Dudoglo resorted also to Turkey's image through the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Thus, one of the promotional materials suggested that Nicolai Dudoglo served a bridge between Turkey and Gagauzia. It should be noted that the Turkish state has paid particular attention to the autonomous region and continues to do so by funding several projects in the rural area of Gagauzia.

Another interesting element of promotional materials of all the candidates for governor emphasized their status as independent candidates in this election. Although not expressly stated that they ran as independent candidates, they have not shown any links with political parties in Moldova. Irina Vlah and Nicolai Dudoglo, who became deputies of the Moldovan Parliament on the PCRM and respectively, PDM tickets, have decided to break the link with the parties that had propelled them to the legislature. While Dudoglo suspended his PDM membership, Irina Vlah quit the ranks of PCRM.

According to the CVs published on the official website of the Central Election Commission of the Gagauz autonomous region, only two candidates have made their partisan affiliation public- Serghei Buzadji, who withdrew from the electoral race (Party of Regions), and Oleg Garizan (PCRM).

There are at least three explanations why for the electoral contestants avoided mentioning their political affiliation. According to the candidates interviewed, one of the explanations is that a candidate must represent the interests of all the Gagauz people and not only of a group of people depending on the priorities of the party. A second explanation is that the affiliation to a national political party would mean that the candidate is the man of Chisinau, which would have diminished the contestant's chance of winning the elections. In fact, this situation shows an isolation of the autonomous region within the Moldovan state, which is often found in the expression "we in Gagauzia and those from Moldova". A third explanation is that the ruling parties have a very bad image in Gagauzia. There is a perception among the Gagauz people that the leaders of these parties, who are deeply involved in cases of corruption, are following only personal interests and are not caring about the citizens' problems. This is the image of the ruling parties in the region, which is one of the main reasons for the negative attitude of the citizens towards the European idea. It is also an explanation why the promotional materials contain images of the Russian and Turkish politicians and make no reference to the leaders of the ruling parties. Igor Dodon and Greceanii are exceptions, explained by the pro-Russian vision they are promoting and by their tough opposition to the current government.

Finally, another aspect of the campaign, which is closely linked to the one mentioned above, is that the national party leaders have refrained from openly supporting any candidate. Moreover, during the election campaign, the politicians from Chisinau, except Igor Dodon, have not showed up in the autonomous region. Taking into account the above, the conclusion is that the leaders of political parties have avoided supporting any candidate in order not to reduce their candidate's chances of winning the elections. However, the defeat of Dudoglo (also of Ianioglo, Croitor, Garizan and Stoianoglo) proves the limits of the Chisinau politicians in Gagauzia, who are confused and don't know what means to use in order to impose themselves in the Gagauz region.³

³ <http://www.politicon.md/alegerile-din-gagauzia-consolidarea-periferiei-si-slabirea-centrului>

GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

An important element of this campaign is the presence of the geopolitical factor in the discourse and electoral programmes of the candidates. This was noted by Pirkka Tapiola, the head of the EU Delegation to Chisinau, who said that the candidates had focused very much on foreign policy issues, very often failing to address economic and social problems.⁴

Speaking of geopolitical factor in this election, we will refer primarily to Irina Vlah electoral campaign, which abounded in messages on foreign policy, using the image of the Russian politicians in the electoral materials⁵. It is interesting to note that the development of relations with the Russian Federation comes first in the electoral platform of Irina Vlah. Moreover, all the five priorities of her political programme contain direct references to the role that the Russian state would have to play in the social welfare and economic development of the Gagauz region. In the autonomous region, the Russian vector is popular⁶ in contrast to the pro-European option which diminishes the chances of those promoting it.

A good example of how the external factor is used in the election campaign against the electoral competitors was the dissemination of the information according to which Nicolai Dudoglo had been denied entry to the Russian Federation.⁷ This information during the election campaign aimed at showing that Nicholai

Dudoglo was far from the most loved Gagauz by the Russian Federation and that, on the contrary, Moscow supported another candidate in that election. Even if Dudoglo denied having such a prohibition, such messages could significantly decrease his chances of winning the elections.

Finally, another key element designed to strengthen the image of Irina Vlah as a pro-Russian politician was the information released during the last week of the election campaign announcing that at the request of Irina Vlah, the migration service of the Russian Federation, had removed the restriction of entry to the Russian Federation of the first 15 Gagauz people included in that list.

The position of Dmitri Croitor is very similar to that of Irina Vlah. Thus, Croitor's electoral materials emphasised the idea of observing the people's will expressed in the referendum from February 2nd, 2014, when the residents of UTA Gagauzia voted for the foreign vector of Moldova. Thus, the candidate promised to do his best to restore the trade links with the Eurasian Union without which, according to him, the economic development of the Gagauz region is not possible.

The external factor was very present also in Nicolai's Dudoglo message. Both his electoral posters and platform made direct references to foreign politicians. Also, his promotional materials contained many articles suggesting that the Russian and Turkish politicians support Dudoglo's candidacy. However, it should be noted that this politician did not hesitate to declare that it was important to develop collaboration and the EU.

⁴ http://www.realitatea.md/tapiola--despre-alegerile-din-gagauzia-campania-electoral-a-este-mai-mult-geopolitica-decat-politica_17288.html

⁵ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=16749>

⁶ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=16638>

⁷ <http://oficial.md/actual/reactia-lui-dudoglo-la-informatia-ca-ar-avea-acces-interzis-in-federatia-rusa>

Mention should be made that Dudoglo found himself in a difficult situation, as being member of the Moldovan Parliament on the PDM list was, of course, associated with a party promoting the European vector.

Valeri Ianioglo had a different approach to this subject. He argued that given the fact that Moldova is divided into two equal parts when it comes to the foreign policy vector, it would be sensible to declare a moratorium on signing agreements with the European Union or Eurasian structures. Ianioglo proposed to adopt a status of the country outside any block and froze every process until there is some clarity about the citizens' options.

Finally, there is a viewpoint that distances itself greatly from the rest of candidates for governor. It is the position of Alexander Stoianoglo who said that the foreign policy is the prerogative of the central authorities. The politician said that those who abuse of the foreign policy issue in their electoral message do not realize very well the problems they create, as this creates confrontations and disagreements between the citizens of the state. However, in his electoral programme, Alexandr Stoianoglo referred to the need to establish relations with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Turkey. The focus was, however, on the development of economic and cultural cooperation. The fact that the three countries are part of the Eurasian bloc makes us believe that this was a tribute to the Gagauz voters' preferences.

It should also be noted the fact which refers to a geopolitical factor intensely used by several candidates in the election campaign. Alexandr Stoianoglo underlined in a discussion that he had often been asked during meetings with voters what capital he would have visited first if he had won the elections. In this case we are talking about the existence of an intense confusion

created in the autonomous region by some politicians who assign to the bashkan tasks related to the foreign policy.

The geopolitical factor of these elections is determined also by the particular interest of Moscow in these elections. It is one of the unusual things in the elections for governor and it is downright amazing the active interest of the Russian media outlets in the governor elections in a region of Moldova⁸, which openly, though their representatives have shown they supported Irina Vlah⁹, a fact interpreted as interference of the Russian Federation in the domestic affairs of the Republic of Moldova.¹⁰ However, it should be mentioned that Irina Vlah explained that she would work with all diplomatic missions and other international actors in order to solve the economic and social problems of the autonomous region. Moreover, she said she would take a constructive approach in relation to the central authorities.

The foreign policy vector was used also to denigrate the candidates. Unfortunately, for several reasons, the idea of the European integration has become a reproach in this region. The candidates with pro-European visions hesitate to declare this because of the widespread anti-European sentiment in the region. The phrase "eurointegrator"¹¹ is widely mockingly used in relation to a candidate who is supportive of the ruling parties. As mentioned above, one of the main reasons for this situation is that they associate the ruling parties accused of serious acts of corruption and promoting the European vector with the European integration process.

⁸ http://unimedia.info/stiri/video-Un-nou-reportaj-marca-Rossia-1-despre-alegerile-din-Gagauzia-89184.html?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=rss

⁹ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=16972>

¹⁰ http://www.publika.md/ministerul-de-externe--rusia-se-implicain-treburile-interne-ale-moldovei-si-sustine-deschis-un-candidat-electoral_355701.html

¹¹ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=16906>

POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

The character of the relations between the new governor and central authorities is of particular importance for Chisinau. How does the governor see the solution of the existing dissensions? What initiatives will the governor promote in the Moldovan government in order to meet the social, economic and political challenges faced by the autonomous region? How will the new governor cooperate with the central authorities?

Development of pragmatic relations with the central authorities was the basic idea that emerged from the interview with Irina Vlah who said that the economic and stability issues will be priorities within her governor mandate. She said she had her own opinion on the political activity of the bashkan and would have a constructive attitude in relation to the central authorities. “Cooperation” and “pragmatism” are the words used by Irina Vlah. According to her, she will work closely with the government and businesses in the country and outside and she would continue Formuzal’s policy of building collaborative relationships with the Russian regions.

Irina Vlah sees the overcoming of disagreements between Comrat and Chisinau by establishing a constructive dialogue with Chisinau. She pays particular attention to the need to guarantee stability, overcome the phenomenon of division of the society and politicians into two camps. Also, according to Irina Vlah, a first step in overcoming these divisions could be achieved by establishing a dialogue between the central and regional authorities in order to discuss appointments to positions of responsibility in the autonomous region. It should be noted that Irina Vlah, like other contestants, has relied heavily on the personal relationships she had established over the years with members of the Government. This

attitude shows a relationship of trust between Vlah and the politicians from Chisinau, which will help her solve the problems faced by the region.

It should be noted that Irina Vlah, like most candidates running for governor, said that the future governor should put the interests of citizens first in his/her work. She emphasized that there should be no room for politicking in this official capacity. By that, she hinted, directly or indirectly, that Formuzal¹²’s loud politics should not be continued as he had been in permanent conflict with the regional and

national authorities. In her first press conference after announcing the preliminary results of the elections from March 22nd, Irina Vlah was full of optimism and explained desire to work with a view to fulfilling her electoral programme objectives.¹³ Speaking about her priorities, Irina Vlah underlined the economic and social problems of the region, announcing several important theses which will form the basis of success of her political programme. The new governor said she would establish good relations with Chisinau, pay significant attention to the agreement with Moscow on the economic and social cooperation signed on February 10th, discuss with other former candidates about a future collaboration and have a meeting with the members of the Gagauz People’s Assembly.¹⁴

There are no doubts about the new governor’s sincerity when it comes to her plans of ensuring stability in the region and also of solving the social and economic problems of the Gagauz autonomy. However, we believe that the situation of the new governor elected on March

¹² <http://www.vedomosti.md/news/problemy-gagauzii>

¹³ <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=17308>

¹⁴ Ibidem

22nd presents some challenges that could complicate her work. In what follows, we will draw your attention to the issues that may appear during Irina's Vlah mandate in a particular context.

First, we will refer to the relationship between Comrat and Chisinau following the results of the elections. Irina Vlah said on various occasions that she would build a constructive dialogue with the central authorities. Indeed, there are reasons for such expectations, as the new governor had been member of the Moldovan Parliament from 2005 to 2015. This allowed her to know very well how the national political system works, which enables her to understand well the political and economic processes of the state. Also, thanks to this experience, she was able to establish personal relationships with politicians in the government, which can be an important element in the support of the bashkan initiatives by the central authorities. However, in this context, there may appear more problems that could limit Vlah's possibilities of having close ties with the central authorities.

One problem is the attitude of the Communists towards the new governor after the latter quitted the party subsequent to the elections from November 30th. We wonder if the Communists, who indirectly participate in the government, will forget about their pride and give the necessary support to their former party colleague.

A second problem is the attitude of the Democrats and Liberal Democrats towards Irina Vlah. To remind you, the ruling parties did not have their stake in the success of the new governor who, in turn, was strongly supported by the Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM), an acerbic critic of the current government. Although Irina Vlah said in the interview that she would not join the socialists and that she would be the governor of all the Gagauz people, the relationship with the PSRM could hinder the establishment of a constructive dialogue with the central authorities.

Finally, another problem is the status of the Gagauz region. The new governor said at the conference mentioned above that she would enhance the status of the autonomous region, without giving details on this

subject. If she insists on broader skills than provided by the current legal framework, she will get into conflict with Chisinau. If the current situation is maintained, which is characterized by some people in the region as failure by the central authorities to observe the status of the autonomous region, she will come into conflict with the radical-nationalist wing of Gagauzia. The conclusion from the above is that Irina Vlah will have to learn the art of leadership in order to face the political and economic challenges. Governance capabilities are important as the new governor has no such experience.

An important aspect is the Chisinau-Comrat-Moscow triangle. In the election campaign, Irina Vlah stressed the importance of respecting the will of the local residents, expressed in the referendum from February 2014 on the rapprochement with the Eurasian structures. After the announcement of the election results from March 22nd, several Russian politicians hurried to congratulate Irina Vlah on her victory in the election, while Dmitry Rogozin did not hesitate to declare that "the success of the new governor means strengthening the Russian positions in Moldova".¹⁵ In their congratulatory statements, the Russian politicians stressed the importance of this event, considering it as a step in the Eurasian integration.

The support of the Russian Federation provided to Irina Vlah marks a new trend in the electoral campaigns in Moldova. A formula was tested according to which a Moscow-backed candidate appears in the electoral materials in the company of Russian politicians. At the same time, the pro-Russian message is supported by a broad campaign of the Russian media. It is likely that this method will be used in the local election campaign, especially in the districts or towns with strong pro-Russian sentiments. Irina Vlah, having massive support from Moscow, will have to support the interest of the region within the Republic of Moldova.

In this context, there are three scenarios that Irina Vlah might follow. The first refers to an open pro-Russia policy. That would mean harsh criticism of the

¹⁵ Россия заняла себе место в Молдавии, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2692933>

Chisinau European integration policy and support of the Eurasian integration. For such an attitude Irina Vlah will be rewarded by Moscow by allowing the Gagauz agricultural products export and lifting the travel ban for the Gagauz people to the Russian Federation. Following this scenario, the Gagauz authorities together with Moscow will undermine the legitimacy of the government of the Republic of Moldova, giving signals to other regions regarding the electoral behaviour of the citizens. Application of this scenario would mean open conflict between Chisinau and Comrat, which would result in the undermining of the Moldovan statehood.

A second scenario would be a shrewd political manoeuvring of Vlah between the Moscow and Chisinau policies. That would mean a moderate approach in the bashkan's discourse that would exclude criticism of the European integration process and search for a compromise between the regional and central authorities regarding the functioning of the Gagauz autonomy. Such a scenario would mean the development of trade, economic and social relations with the Russian Federation.

Under the third scenario, the pro-Eurasian rhetoric would be abandoned in favour of the pro-European one. This requires an open collaboration with the EU embassies and the Delegation of the European Union to Moldova, an open dialogue with Chisinau on the delimitation of competences and renunciation of the rhetoric of blackmail against the central authorities.

Irina Vlah will have to face internal pressure from local politicians. It is praiseworthy her invitation to dialogue made to all candidates for governor. However, without knowing what Vlah's real expectations are from a possible consolidation of all forces, we believe that this appeal will not be successful. The newly elected governor will have a complicated life in the autonomous region.

There are several reasons to suggest such a development of events. We admit that the message of the candidates was to a large extent similar, but once the election campaign is over the interests or party groups of the former contestants may appear in the foreground.

First, the People's Assembly is very heterogeneous, being divided into several factions that have not supported Irina Vlah in this election. The fact that the new governor was supported by Formuzal involves continuation of the fight between Irina Vlah and the People's Assembly. There is also Dudoglo's team which will not easily accept the defeat. There is also the group that unites Dmitri Constantinov, Ivan Cimpoeş and Serghei Burgudji, who had quarrelled with Igor Dodon on the candidacy for the office of governor. Secondly, we must take into account the symbolic character of Vlah's victory. The success of a woman was a blow to the pride of the male candidates, who, with some exceptions, declared that a woman has no chance to win this election in the autonomous region. Disagreements may occur because of the reluctance of the male politicians to accept such a denouement. In fact, the victory of Irina Vlah is one of the biggest contradictions of these elections because her success is the result of the spread of the European values in a patriarchal environment.

From the above analysis, we can conclude that Irina Vlah, despite her resounding victory in the elections, will have a complicated agenda as governor of the autonomous region of Gagauzia. We mean that the new governor will have to succeed in building a relationship of trust with the Moldovan authorities with which she finds herself in opposition given her election campaign. Also, Irina Vlah will have to be very clever in order to manoeuvre between the expectations of Moscow and the Chisinau's official policy. Finally, at the local level, Irina Vlah could be confronted by the factions and interest groups for political or economic reasons.

CONCLUSIONS

- The referendum held last year proved the Gagauz politicians and experts who declared that the event would entail a lot more attention towards the autonomous region right. The governor elections have been closely followed by the central authorities and also by the diplomatic missions and international organizations with representation in Chisinau.
- The leaders of the ruling parties had a discrete approach to the elections from March 22nd. They have avoided to openly supporting any candidate in this election in order not to reduce their electoral chances. This attitude is explained by the negative feelings towards the ruling parties that dominate the spirits in Gagauzia. The Moldovan politicians had rather an attitude of reaction to the Moscow's open involvement by supporting one of the candidates.
- We could observe an active involvement of the Russian media and politicians in the Gagauz governor elections. Moscow's interest towards a region with a population of only 150 thousand citizens raises questions. Irina's Vlah victory in the first round of elections confirms Russia's success in the region.
- The geopolitical factor has been extensively used by the electoral contestants in this campaign. The candidates for governor have tried to take advantage of the pro-Russian sentiments of the Gagauz people. The pre-eminence of the geopolitical factor reflects the situation across the region, as a response to the war in Ukraine and deepening of the Eastern Partnership. In future, Chisinau will have to face increasing summons coming from the regions. Some of them, such as Gagauzia, Balti, Taraclia, may be transformed into factors blocking the European integration, which will create difficulties to Chisinau that will not be able to fulfil its pro-European agenda.
- Almost all competitors, with few exceptions, have participated in these elections as independent candidates. The decision to openly show the absence of any link with national political parties demonstrates the discredit of the latter in the Gagauz region. It also highlights the situation of isolation that exists between Chisinau and Comrat.
- Vlah's victory puts an end to the confrontation between Formuzal and Dudoglo in Gagauzia. Over the last three years, Dudoglo has actively campaigned to undermine the position of the former governor, being heavily supported by Chisinau, and namely by the Democratic Party of Moldova. This strategy has proved a false stake as Dudoglo lost positions, becoming a person repudiated in the Gagauz region. Chisinau will have to find new faces to propel them to the forefront of the Gagauz politics as Dudoglo seems to be a candidate with no chances.
- Irina Vlah said her main objective is the economic stability and development of the autonomous region. However, we have to admit that the new bashkan is a new pillar of the Russian politics in the region that will complicate a lot Chisinau's life. Her efforts will be doubled in Chisinau by Igor Dodon who will amplify this message. Thus, Russia aims at creating an anti-European cordon in Moldova that will stretch from Briceni to Vulcănești with the ultimate goal of putting pressure on Chisinau and changing the direction of its foreign policy. The geopolitical confrontation will manifest itself in Moldova through the antagonism between the centre and the periphery.