

## The Republic of Budjak: Next in line?

The idea of the Republic of Budjak appeared at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s within the process of a national awakening triggered by perestroika. The republic was supposed to include the localities where Gagauzians and Bulgarians lived in southern Moldova and, in another variant, were also in the neighboring southern part of the Ukrainian Odesa region. No such scenario was realised, however Gagauzians from Moldova managed to create their (separatist) republic that existed till 1994 when their region was granted autonomous status within a unitary state. From time to time, the idea of the Republic of Budjak had returned.

January 2, 2015 - [Marcin Kosienkowski](https://neweasterneurope.eu/post-author/marcin-kosienkowski/) (<https://neweasterneurope.eu/post-author/marcin-kosienkowski/>) - [Articles and Commentary](https://neweasterneurope.eu/category/articles-and-commentary-50/) (<https://neweasterneurope.eu/category/articles-and-commentary-50/>).



Crucially, it was highlighted in a [November 2014 report](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region?fsrc=scn/tw_ec/towards_the_unknown_region) ([http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region?fsrc=scn/tw\\_ec/towards\\_the\\_unknown\\_region](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region?fsrc=scn/tw_ec/towards_the_unknown_region)) by Kyiv-based “Da Vinci AG” Analytic Group because of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, attracting the attention of some mainstream newspapers such as *Nezavisimaya gazeta* ([http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-11-27/1\\_kiev.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-11-27/1_kiev.html)) and *The Economist* ([http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region?fsrc=scn/tw\\_ec/towards\\_the\\_unknown\\_region](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region?fsrc=scn/tw_ec/towards_the_unknown_region)).

**Bessarabia spring of 2015**

The “Da Vinci AG” Analytic Group warns in its report that the Republic of Budjak could be established in the spring of 2015. It would be rather called the Bessarabian People’s Republic, alluding to the already existing peoples’ republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and it would not be limited just to Gagauzians and Bulgarians, encompassing the whole southern part of the Odesa region. However, the irredentism could start in Moldova’s autonomous unit of Gagauzia. This area is labelled by the report’s authors as the main focus of Russia’s activity in the region, which began with an (illegally) organized referendum in February 2014. Then the vast majority had supported Moldova’s integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union instead of the EU (which is promoted by the central government) and stated that if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty (another reference for further integration with the EU), Gagauzia would become an independent republic. In the group’s opinion, new tensions could be related to the elections of Gagauzia’s governor taking place in March 2015.

The reports says that the establishment of the Bessarabian People’s Republic would be supported by Russia. The point is it would destabilise the region by creating new hot spots in two pro-Western, unfriendly states and by additionally thawing the Transnistrian conflict. It would also allow to have a stronghold used to attack in the direction of Odesa and open a new, south-western front in Ukraine.

The Group mentions other factors that are in favour of triggering separatism in the southern part of the Odesa region. The first one is proximity to Moldova’s breakaway republic of Transnistria with Russian troops that could be quickly moved to secure the Bessarabian People’s Republic. It could be cut from the rest of Ukraine by control over just two roads located at either side of the Dniester Estuary. Additionally, it is a multi-ethnic region, including Ukrainians (40 per cent of the population), Bulgarians (21 per cent), Russians (20 per cent), Moldovans (13 per cent), and Gagauzians (4 per cent). Moreover, there are significant national enclaves, in other words villages dominated by a single ethnic group, and there are links between Bulgarian and Gagauzian elites from Ukraine and Moldova. Another favourable factor is the poor socio-economic situation of the region (while Russia’s patronage could bring improvements). Finally, the population’s political preferences are of great importance—it votes mainly on parties and politicians that promote tightening links with Russia and developing Eurasian integration project.

### **The train has already left**

Although the annexation of Crimea by Russia and a conflict in eastern Ukraine illustrate that no scenario should be excluded while there have even been some provocations in Moldova’s and Ukraine’s southern regions, it seems that the establishment of the Republic of Budjak or the Bessarabian People’s Republic is hardly likely. First of all, people from the Moldovan and Ukrainian parts of the would-be separatist republic do not want war like in Donbas. “The main slogan during the October 2014 parliamentary election campaign in my region was peace,” emphasised Viktor Drozdov from the Izmail State Humanities University. Additionally, anti-Kyiv feelings in the Odesa region were cooled by unexplained tragic events that took place in its main city on May 2nd 2014, resulting in deaths of more than forty pro-Russian, anti-Maidan activists. And other southern and eastern Ukrainian regions have managed to deter separatism. “So, the train has already left,” Drozdov concluded.

Despite the fact there are tensions between Moldova’s national minorities, including Gagauzians and Bulgarians, and the central government, they have little in common with separatism. National minorities’ position can be explained (<http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/moldovas-national-minorities-why-are-they-euroskeptical-0>), rather by factors of centre-regional tension, overall neglect, low information, and also by the political entrepreneurship of regional elites more concerned with local socio-economics than international geopolitics. And while Russia has some influence, it does not have direct control over Moldova’s national minorities. And there is no situation with a “subversive” co-operation between Moldova’s and Ukraine’s minorities.



Photo: Marcin Kosienkowski

Whereas in the case of Ukrainian Bessarabia, as Igor Karpechenko from the Odesa-based Centre for Black Sea Studies notes, there exists a relatively peaceful co-existence of multi-ethnic population with no major problems of an ethnic character in its relations with Kyiv. He adds that “Ukrainian Gagauzians and Bulgarians do not envy the fact that their Moldovan compatriots have their own entities—respectively the autonomous Gagauzia and the district of Taraclia. “Generally, despite people’s political pro-Russian preferences, they are in favour of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.” It can be added that memory of the 1990-era idea of the establishment of the Republic of Budjak in the region is close to null.

Importantly, representatives of elites from the southern Odesa region categorically denied (<http://vfokuse.md/news/index.php?newsid=6987>) any plans to split from Ukraine. Why many regional politicians can be called opportunists, who are eager to change their political views for personal benefit, in the present circumstances they would not dare support separatism and risk their career and even freedom. To be sure, there is an idea of restoring the Izmail region that existed till 1954, however it is mainly about the desire to get better financing and save time and money reaching Odesa by a dilapidated road. All in all, it is hardly likely that it will be promoted in the time of struggle with separatism.

### **Doomed to failure**

There is still a risk that the regional administration could be taken over by a small group of local or “guest” rebels. However, Moldovan special services attempt to identify threats, there were even some arrests and prison sentences, while their Ukrainian counterparts may be better prepared to act after the failures of Crimea and Donbas. The problem could be the passivity of local inhabitants. But Ruslan Olenkevich—the editor-in-chief of the Ukrainian news portal *Bessarabiya Inform*—says that there are various patriotic groups in Izmail and the region that would protest against rebel's activities. Moreover, he praises the work of local police (which is said to be dominated by Bulgarians) that prevented any clashes between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian protesters in Izmail on May 2, 2014.

One of arguments presented by Artyom Filipenko (<http://viknaodessa.od.ua/news/?news=105725>) from the Odesa-branch of the National Institute for Strategic Studies why the Bessarabian People's Republic will not be created is that the region does not border with Russia, quite the opposite—it borders with Romania, a member of NATO and the European Union. Even if the local administration is controlled by the rebels and the Bessarabian People's Republic is declared, this factor along with no or minimal support of local population mean the republic is likely to be doomed to failure. To be sure, the region has access to the Black Sea, but it may not be obtained by rebels and it could be blocked unlike an eastern border between Ukraine and Russia.

The involvement of Transnistria is debatable ([https://neweasterneurope.eu/old\\_site/articles-and-commentary/1342-ukraine-and-transnistria-a-troubled-borderland](https://neweasterneurope.eu/old_site/articles-and-commentary/1342-ukraine-and-transnistria-a-troubled-borderland)), despite the fact it was publicly declared by Kyiv as a threat to Ukraine's security. Iryna Maksymenko from the Odesa National University doubts that the Transnistrian elites will undertake aggressive steps against Ukraine if they are reasonable. Interestingly, the Odesa region authorities have expressed recently (<http://zn.ua/ECONOMICS/ukraina-mozhet-nachat-import-elektroenergii-iz-pridnestrovya-162127.html>) their interest in buying energy from pro-Russian Transnistria what could be a sign of Ukrainian-Transnistrian détente, at least in a regional dimension. Russia's involvement from Transnistria would be more likely though it is hard to estimate its probability. There are 1,500–2,000 Russian soldiers stationed there, but according to some analyses ([http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5btt\\_news%5d=42752&tx\\_ttnews%5bbackPid%5d=228&cHash=1580aed0b26c1482691c346c4c01d54a#.VKQbj3tCi8C](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btt_news%5d=42752&tx_ttnews%5bbackPid%5d=228&cHash=1580aed0b26c1482691c346c4c01d54a#.VKQbj3tCi8C)) it could (or already has) quickly and easily increase the number to about 6,500 personnel. However, such a military operation could weaken Transnistria in terms of its defence capabilities and meet with various reaction of neighbouring Romania and Moldova, and the West, while the lack of a border between the Bessarabian People's Republic and Russia would still be a serious problem.

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