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# **LOCAL IDENTITY AND INTER-ETHNIC INTERACTION IN THE SOUTH OF ODESSA REGION: PROBLEMS AND TRENDS OF TRANSFORMATION**

2015

**Working hypothesis** - verification of conflict potential existence and ethnicity-based separatist sentiments in the south of Odessa region.

**Research goal** - to assess major trends and risks of radicalization of public sentiments in Bulgarian, Moldovan and Gagauz communities of Odessa region.

**Methods of research:** in-depth interviews with representatives of ethnic groups, as well as focus group study conducted in Izmail in November 2014 were chosen as basic methods. Also open sources were analyzed (publications in Odessa regional media, websites of departments of Odessa Region State Administration which focus on ethnic interaction in Odessa region).

## INTRODUCTION

Odessa region is now one of the most multi-ethnic regions in Ukraine. While other border areas' multi-ethnic composition was the result of their historical transition from one state to another, as well as traditional cross-border processes of settlement of ethnic groups, demographic composition of Odessa region was formed also through the colonization of "free" land by representatives of various ethnic groups in the late 18-19 century after the transition of this territory from the Ottoman to Russian Empire. Because of these historical processes, the multi-ethnic composition of the center and some major cities as well as mono-ethnic settlement of the villages, mostly to the south of Odessa emerged.

For many years, this multi-ethnicity has been considered as an advantage in the region that showed sufficient tolerance and met the needs of most national cultural communities in the region. However, since 2014 the attempts to "heat up" an idea of separatist sentiments of individual ethnic groups in the south of Odessa region and even creation of the so-called People's Republic of Bessarabia have appeared. In addition, various ethnic groups in the south of Odessa region are considered more pro-Russian and express negative attitudes towards another wave of mobilization.

*Note: The average population of Odessa region in 2013 amounted to 2395.8 thousand of people. According to the 2001 census, the population structure of Odessa region is as following: Ukrainians - 62.8%, Russians - 20.7%, Bulgarians - 6.1%, Moldovans - 5% Gagauz - 1.1%, Jews - 0.6%. The most diverse in ethnic sense is the Danube region, where representatives of Gagauz, Moldovan, and Bulgarian minorities are settled in a compact way and constitute the overwhelming majority. There are 162 organizations of national-cultural pattern in the region, which are positioning themselves as the spokespersons of the respective ethnic communities.*

*Bulgarians are concentrated mainly in the south and south-west of the region, particularly in Bolhrad (60.8%), Artsyz (39.0%), Tarutino (37.5%), Izmail (25.7%) districts.*

*Moldovans are densely settled in the north and in the south of the region - in Reni (49.0%), Izmail (27.6%) districts.*

*Representatives of Gagauz diaspora are densely settled in the south and south-west of the region in Bolhrad (18.7%), Reni (7.9%), Tarutino (6.0%), Kiliya (3.8%) districts.*

Peculiarity of the south of Odessa region is that from 1940 to 1954 there was a separate territorial-administrative unit - Izmail region, which was ruled by Romania from 1941 to 1944 (part of the province of Bessarabia, which also included the territory of the Republic of Moldova). This area included, in particular, Artsyz, Bolhrad, Kiliya, Reni, Sarata, Tarutino, Tatarbunary districts and others.

Izmail district of Odessa region is one of the most multi-ethnic. In particular, in 23 settlements there live 55 thousand people: Ukrainians - 28%, Bulgarians - 26.98%, Moldovans - 26.73%, Russians - 16%.

On December 26, 2012, the new Program on Support for Development of National Minorities and Activities of Ethno-Cultural Communities of Odessa Region for 2013-2015 was adopted. Unfortunately, for the last 2 years this program has received minimal funding that does not allow using it to the fullest. Besides, in Odessa region there is a Council of Representatives of National Cultural Societies of Odessa region, affiliated with the Department of Culture and Tourism of Odessa Region State Administration. However, its affiliation with the department and not the head of Odessa Region Administration and its focus mainly on social and cultural issues reduces the weight of this advisory body.

## **RESULTS OF RESEARCH**

**Attitudes to events of November 2013 - February 2014** are not different from the all-Ukrainian ones. Most respondents call these events "revolution of dignity." Respondents point out that ethnic conflicts were incited during this period artificially. In particular, among the examples there were cited the efforts to incite anti-Semitic sentiments in the country, or vice versa, to accuse members of "Right sector" in Odessa in anti-Semitic attitudes and actions.

**Attitude to the Crimean events** is controversial. The sentiments in Izmail region is a cause for concern. On the one hand, they reflect Odessa sentiments where civic consciousness is growing. On the other hand, there are some worrisome expectations present. In small towns and villages, the frame of mind is perceived as pro-Russian sentiments. Respondents especially pointed to "pro-Putin" sentiments in some Moldovan and Bulgarian villages of Izmail district. At the same time, respondents explain this by "economic" reasons because Russia was the main market for agricultural products from Moldovan villages, and they are losing this market now. In addition, it was noted that the period of the Russian Empire was symbolized by the allocation of land to these people, at the time when serfdom was spread on other territories. The Soviet Union was a period of economic prosperity of "Prydunavya" (Near Danube region), while during the last 20 years it has transformed into a depressive region with ports being closed and significant deterioration of socio-economic situation. That is why residents of this region have considerable nostalgia for the old days that are automatically associated with modern Russia.

Respondents believe that in Odessa events will not unfold according to the Crimean and Donbas scenario, also because "*after the events of May 2 there will be no open support*". But passivity in case of aggression is not being ruled out. There is a division in the ideological terms, not in inter-ethnic ones.

However, respondents express the view that "*the cause of secession of Crimea is a result that for 23 years of independence, Ukraine has virtually ignored some regions, including Crimea, and if to project this situation to our region, we are just in the same situation*". It has been suggested that Bessarabia was peripheral to the Soviet Union and the situation has not changed in independent Ukraine. Therefore, there is a concern about possible social discontent like in Crimea, but there was noted some decline of these sentiments because of seeing the situation in Crimea. That is why they "*begin to assess more adequately consequences this all can lead to*", and choose social stability instead of foreign policy orientation.

At the same time, the main threat is felt coming from Transnistria, as it is believed that Russia's purpose is to connect Crimea and Transnistria. Assessments of the possible reaction of the population are ambiguous; the majority agrees that there will be no active support as in Donbass and wait-and-see position is most likely.

### **The question of self-identification and protection of rights**

**Answering the question "Whom do you consider yourself in the first place - representatives of your national community or a citizen of Ukraine?"** the majority of respondents

chose "citizen of Ukraine". There is an increase of such a perception compared to previous years, when ethnicity came out on top and even influenced the political preferences if there was a candidate who clearly identified himself as a representative of certain ethnic minority. Some conflict potential can occur in mono-ethnic villages (e.g. Ozerne, Kamyshivka). The growth of pro-Ukrainian sentiments is witnessed alongside the developments in Donbass. Moldovan community stresses that increased embracing of Ukrainian civic identity began last year.

In addition, there is a strong local identity – identity of Bessarabia. Apart from mono-ethnic villages, in larger cities there is a significant mixing of blood due to historical reasons, that is why some respondents felt it difficult to unequivocally choose their national identity.

The low level of integration of the southern districts of Odessa region in all-Ukrainian information space, presence of strong local identification provide some grounds for triggering conflict potential in inter-ethnic relations. Rumors remained an important source of information for the population of Bessarabia. Often MPs elected from specified areas serve as a source of information and retransmitters of state's position.

Relative majority of study's participants are satisfied with how their language and cultural needs are met. However, there are two conflicting trends. On the one hand, in certain areas there is a decrease in the level of minority languages' teaching, because of the lack of time in school curricula, optionality of studies etc. On the other hand, there are schools where the main language of instruction is the language of a minority, where as a result of studies graduates are unable to speak Ukrainian, and sometimes even sufficient Russian, which leads to their exclusion from the subsequent studying process in Ukrainian universities.

However, some respondents stressed the importance of Ukraine's non-interference into internal life of communities. In fact, it was noted that Ukraine has traditionally created conditions for the development of national cultural societies, but the minorities themselves often do not use existing opportunities.

The majority of respondents indicated that the existing level of interaction with the "mother state" is quite satisfactory for them. At the same time, not any single participant of the research expressed the desire to acquire the citizenship of the "mother state", but stressed that such a problem exists mainly among the Bulgarian community. Some participants consider dual citizenship as a normal European practice, but most converged on the view that simplification of the Schengen visa regime would remove this problem, because one of the main reasons behind the wish to acquire dual citizenship was issue of mobility and employment of the population.

According to respondents, there are no problems with using Russian language in Izmail and Izmail district; everyone uses the language he/she wants. The problem of the Russian language has been manipulated from elections to elections. The language problem is more serious for older people because they did not study Ukrainian language at school.

However, some participants drew attention to the work of pro-Romanian "agents" in the region that has become more active in 2014. One of the "problems" according to respondents is the attempts of the Romanian side to unite the Romanian and Moldovan community in a single "Romanian" one. At the same time, locals quite clearly distinguish between these two communities. Villages Kamyshivka and Ozerne are referred to as the ones with the highest pro-Romanian sentiments.

One can state the absence of conflict between different ethnic communities. The perception of other ethnic communities is generally positive. The exception is Roma people because of "*their lifestyle*".

Most participants of research agreed that in the south of Odessa region there is an informal division of certain positions on a national basis. However, there is also the opposite situation. For instance, in Reni district where almost 70% of population is representatives of the Moldovan

community there has not been a single representative of Moldovan ethnic minority as a head of the District State Administration since Ukraine became independent. Some respondents noted the need of official introduction of quota representation for ethnic communities. At the same time, the assessment of the quality of work of the members of ethnic communities in elected bodies was not provided.

**Gagauz community in Odessa region.** From time to time a topic of creation of the Bessarabia People's Republic and threat of separatism on ethnic basis appear in information space of Ukraine. One of the recent studies is an analysis made by the *Da Vinci group*, published in November 2014 that highlights the major risks of creation of the BPR. As arguments dwells on increased risks of separatist movements based on ethnic factor, authors bring the results of parliamentary elections in 2014 when political parties of pro-Russian orientation got the majority in the districts №141-143 (places of compact living of Bulgarian, Moldovan, Gagauz minorities). The emphasis is put on the fact that Russia will try to destabilize areas densely populated by ethnic communities (creation of the Gagauz autonomy that would undermine both parts of Ukraine and Moldova).

We believe that these findings are provocative and baseless, because of: 1. Lack of proper communication and cooperation programs between the Gagauz communities of Moldova and Ukraine; 2. The lowest level of anti-Ukrainian sentiments among the Gagauz community compared to other minorities; 3. Scattered placement of compact residence of Gagauz people in Ukraine; 4. Lack of coordination between various national minorities whose association is implied in case of creation of the "republic".

This report and speculations on the subject caused quite a negative response from Gagauz minority in the south of Odessa region.

Interests of Gagauz people are represented in Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (MP Anton Kisse who, despite belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic community is also dealing with the issues of Gagauz minority residing in the territory of 142<sup>nd</sup> constituency where he was elected). In Odessa Regional Council a group "Bessarabia" exists, led by a member of the Regional Council Yuriy Dimchoglo. At the same time, such a representation by ethnicity is unofficial.

Recently there started a negative process when an issue of political competition is transported into problems of national minorities whose representatives are actively involved in the political process. In late 2014 officials of the Regional Council has been accused of "discrimination" against **Bulgarians of Odessa region**. The basis for this was the refusal of the Odessa Regional Council to extend the contract with the director of the Odessa regional center of the Bulgarian culture in Bolhrad without explanation and claims to the candidate, as well as exclusion of All-Ukrainian Center of Bulgarian culture in Odessa from the list of NGOs which are provided subsidies for the rent of the buildings. Local Bulgarian media associated with MP Kisse - President of the Association of Bulgarians of Ukraine - called it a violation of rights of 150-thousand Bulgarian diaspora in the region. It was suggested that this is "*political retaliation because of the lack of support for the pro-regime candidate Serhiy Parashchenko whose interests were actively lobbied during the parliamentary elections by Oleksiy Goncharenko*" (parliamentary group "For Odessa!" headed by Goncharenko before he was elected as MP did not support the relevant decisions of Regional Council).

As for the **religious rights**, there is a visible cautious attitude to the Baptists whose numbers increased in recent years. Sometimes warnings of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate against the expansion of the Romanian Orthodox Church can be noted. Absence of churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate is referred to as another disadvantage by the representatives of the Ukrainian community. It has no single church in the south of Odessa region because it cannot get land for the construction of churches. In addition, respondents noted active propaganda work of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate that causes resistance among certain number of parishioners.

However, all respondents indicated that there are no factors in Izmail that would interfere with the right to choose religion.

**European Union** is perceived as a civilizational choice, space for free movement, broad educational opportunities by most respondents. There was expressed a view that the decision to sign Association Agreement with the EU is "an act of self-identification". At the same time, expectations from signing the Agreement are less optimistic than a year ago. In particular, none of the respondents expects economic preferences for Ukraine. The essential reservation is a lack of information on the European Union and the Association, lack of information from the Government of Ukraine on the prospects and activities towards European integration.

Also among the Gagauz minority, there is a false perception of the European integration. Since the Gagauz autonomy of Moldova perceives the European integration as a takeover by Romania, and Moldovan government does not conduct proper information policy, these rumors and perceptions are transmitted to the Ukrainian Gagauz minority.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

In general, inter-ethnic relations in the south of Odessa region are marked by tolerance and lack of separatist sentiments. Despite strong local Bessarabian identity, Ukrainian identity significantly increased during the last year.

Representatives of Moldovan, Bulgarian, Gagauz communities consider their linguistic, cultural and religious rights as sufficiently satisfied. At the same time, low socio-economic development of Danube region (Prydnavya), decline of infrastructure, high unemployment and lack of government's attention to the peripheral region create conditions for anti-Ukrainian sentiments and a sense of isolation from the Ukrainian state. Pro-Russian sentiments of certain communities are not caused by geopolitical choice but by economic orientation of markets of agricultural products and nostalgic sentiments.

There is an evident need for unbiased media coverage of the nature of the current state of inter-ethnic relations in the south of Odessa region. Delivery of unverified information can lead to the creation of conflicts, spread of anxiety feeling among the population of southern areas of Odessa region.

Use of inter-ethnic relations and discrimination against certain ethnic groups as instruments of political struggle is unacceptable. Separate issue is the role of churches in a region where there is no Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate. Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate is perceived as being sometimes a carrier of propaganda.

The issue of dual citizenship is not acutely on the agenda in the south of Odessa region and mostly linked to mobility problems and not to the desire to unite with the "mother state". Despite the cautious attitude to the European integration of Ukraine due to the lack of proper information on this subject, it is believed that introduction of a visa-free regime and further integration can remove the issue of dual citizenship and have a positive impact on economic development.

Among the main fears of residents of the south of Odessa region are possible expansion of a zone of military activities and attempts to destabilize the situation in the region because of the desire to connect Crimea and Transnistria. At the same time, there has been a change in sentiments and confidence in impossibility to implement the Crimean scenario because people witness negative socio-economic situation in the Crimea and east of Ukraine.

Local government reform and decentralization were named by representatives of national communities as one of the tools to improve economic situation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. It is necessary to implement State regional action plan on the development of Ukrainian Danube region (Prydunavya) for 2014-2017. One of its consequences would be ensuring the employment in southern districts of Odessa region that can serve as a significant factor in reducing conflicts.

2. In order to improve coordination of work with national minorities it is relevant to restore Department on Nationalities and Religions as a separate structure of the Odessa Region State Administration and to appoint individuals responsible for national minorities' issues in the respective district administrations. Existence of an independent department in Odessa region proved its effectiveness in the early 2000s and its restoration is supported by representatives of national minorities. In particular, it will facilitate the monitoring and forecasting of ethno-national problems and development of stable working mechanisms of interaction between executive authorities and local self-government in the region with national cultural civil society organizations.

3. Odessa Region State Administration together with representatives of ethno-cultural communities should develop the concept of information interaction with the ethnic communities living in the south of Odessa region to integrate them into the information space of Odessa and Ukraine.

4. To promote cross-border cooperation programs in the framework of technical assistance programs from the EU (e.g. Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation Programme - Ukraine - Moldova) that is able to increase the level of economic development of the region and pro-European aspirations.

5. To support projects of national and cultural cooperation and the use of methods of "public diplomacy", signing the agreements with the cities of the "mother states" that will allow meeting the needs of national and cultural minorities. Also, since Romania and Bulgaria are members of the EU and Moldova is on the path towards the European integration, this factor can facilitate in reducing the pro-Russian sentiments.

6. To provide outreach on government initiatives in the local media, to hold public hearings etc., to inform the population of the southern districts of Odessa region on current events and governmental initiatives, especially taking into account the spread of satellite TV (Russian channels) in the region.

7. Due to the crisis in communications between representatives of military commissioners and local population on the particularities of mobilization in southern districts of Odessa region, it is recommended to involve leaders of national and cultural communities to explain the essence, objectives and principles of the military service in Ukraine at this stage.

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