
PROTOIEREUS MIHAIL CHAKIR – ORTHODOX PRIEST, GAGAUZIAN SPIRITUAL LEADER AND HISTORIAN (1861-1938) – AND THE QUESTION OF EMANCIPATION OF GAGAUZIANS AS THE INDEPENDENT NATION

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Undoubtedly, the Protoiereus Mihail Chakir was one of the most interesting persons in all the history of Bessarabia. Moreover, during his lifetime the geographical region between the Pruth and Dniester rivers experienced very difficult situation. First of all, during the lifetime of Mihail Chakir there was the First World War (and also two Balkan wars before it) and the October Revolution in Russia. At the same time Bessarabia changed its political situation and state's identity. Mihail Chakir was born in the Russian Empire, but he died in the "Great Romania". And so, the intensive activity of Mihail Chakir can be analyzed on many fields. The most important fields of his activity (as it seems) were: his very energetic activity as the Orthodox priest and as Gagauzian spiritual leader and also as the historian.

Mihail Chakir was born in Bessarabia on April 27 (May 9 in the Julian calendar) of 1861 in the colony of Ceadâr-Lunga. He descended from the kin from which many members were connected with the Orthodox Church – both as priests and as members of administrative personnel. The founder of colony Ceadâr-Lunga was his forefather Zahariy Chakir. The history of the kin of Chakir (Чакир 2005, 25-55) had been described in 1893 by one of its members Dmitriy Chakir (1839-1916) (Булгар 2005, 21-24), who was also the Orthodox priest.

Mihail Chakir was certainly the Gagauzian educator but at the same time the ethnic identity of the Chakir kin is not easy to analyze. In some modern literature we can find the information that above-mentioned Dmitri Chakir (a little older member of Chakir kinship) functioned also as "the Gagauzian educator" (Булгар 2005, 21). It is namely his book which initiated the history of Gagauzian (but he published his book in Russian language). Dmitri Chakir placed the beginning of his kinship in the first half of 17th century on Bulgarian soil. He stated that the Chakir kinship belongs to

Bulgarian nation and at the same time belongs to Slav tribe (Чакир 2005, 26). Moreover, he pointed out that Gagauzians (or *Gagauz people*) are Bulgarians who during the Turkish occupation had two possibilities of compulsory assimilation. In connection with the first possibility Bulgarians could preserve their native language but they had to accept the Islamic faith. The second possibility had been

a reverse – they could preserve the Christian faith but they had to accept Turkish language. Thanks to this theory such the Bulgarians who preserved the faith of their forefathers became known as Gagauzians but such the Bulgarians who accepted the Islamic faith became known as the so-called Pomaks (Чакир 2005, 29). But the above-mentioned statement can not be regarded as the scientific theory. It is rather connected with some tribal customs and local tradition. The Bulgarian scientist Grigor Grigorov rightly noticed that we know some Christian communities in other regions of the world which use some Turkic languages but do not present themselves as Turks. For instance, in Georgia there is the group of Christians regarding themselves as Greeks in spite of their Turkophonous positions (Григоров 2008, 255.). They also in a similar way present their original situation (the Christian faith and at the same time Turkic language) in the identical way as Dmitri Chakir did. Undoubtedly, in the very Chakir kinship there were controversies on the question of his ethnical position.

Unfortunately, the question of ethnic origin of Gagauzians is not definitely established. There are quite many hypotheses but because of lack of written historical sources no one hypothesis can be scientifically verified (Етногенез 2002; Матеева 2006; Гагаузите 2007). In spite of some intense researches in some latest years there is no progress. We can say nowadays (such as many years ago) that there is "the people of

mysterious origin” (Зайончковски 1974, 77). The situation that in Moldavia and in Ukraine the descendance of Gagauzians from some medieval Turkish tribes is regarded as the established historical fact can not finish the scientific discussion but rather have to be the stimulus for further scientific investigations. On the other hand, the Bulgarian authorities in Sofia “do not negate the position that Gagauzians belong to the Bulgarian nation”. This means that if Gagauzians feel themselves also as Bulgarians they belong *de facto* to the Bulgarian nation. Such is the official political position of Sofia. Moreover, the ethnic identity of Gagauzians is additionally complicated by the dual self-identification of Gagauzians (both in Balkans and in Transcaucasia) – not only as “Gagauzians” but also at the same time as “Bulgarians”. Only in Bessarabia Gagauzians treat themselves as the separate nation because not only some political questions (both Romanian and Soviet politics later on) but also because of tendencies presented by Gagauzians toward the emancipation. Dmitri Chakir presented himself (as it had been already written in this article) *de facto* as Bulgarian and Slav but at the same time Mihail Chakir presented himself as Gagauzian only. As testify this example the national identity is connected not only with ethnical identity but it is rather a kind of free choice made by a given person.

Mihail Chakir was the first Gagauzian who had not problems with his ethnic identity. He did not recognized the double self-identification as “Gagauzian” but also as “Bulgarian”. And so he was proponent of breaking all ethnical relations with Bulgarians and he treated Gagauzians as the separate nation in Bessarabia. It was namely Mihail Chakir who can be treated as the forefather of Gagauzian emancipation. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that he undertook his activity in very favourable political situation. The Romanian authorities after the first world war definitely separated Gagauzians from Bulgarians and even financed many social and cultural activities undertaken by Mihail Chakir. Of course such the position was politically motivated. In Romania after the First World War the attitude of political authorities toward the national minorities was not good and in some periods this attitude had been openly hostile. The great minority of so-called “Bulgarian colonists” who lived in Romania could

not be supported by political authorities which had mainly nationalistic attitudes. And so, such the big Christian community descending from a neighbouring country had to be divided into two smaller parts. In the official statistical materials Gagauzians had been separated (as the separate nation) and even some teachers from Turkey had been invited. Moreover, at that time Gagauzian community in Bessarabia had very weak national consciousness. Gagauzians came to Bessarabia together with Bulgarians but did not feel as the separate nation at that time. The political authorities in tsarist Russia treated them as Bulgarians who speak in Turkish language. Few scientists only mentioned somewhere on Gagauzians as the group of persons separate from Bulgarians. There were practically no intelligentsia amongst Gagauzians at that time (instead of few priests of Gagauzian origin) and the rural community thought that in a situation that they came from Bulgaria so they also had to be Bulgarians – besides they had the same religion.

Michail Chakir began his education in his native town of Ceadâr-Lunga. But later on as the youngster he transferred to Chișinău where in practice he spent whole his mature life up to his death. First he learned in the lower secondary school for boys and later on he learned in the seminary. After he graduated this religious school (in 1881) he remained in this school as the school teacher of geography and religion. He had been elected the president of school council at Chișinău by the ministry of education. Moreover, he taught also in some other schools in Chișinău. In 1884 he became a priest and he worked in some Orthodox churches in the capital of Bessarabia and also in the village of Schinoasa nearby.

In 1896 Mihail Chakir presented the petition to the ministry of education of the Russian Empire and asked for the possibility of printing some books in Moldavian (Romanian) language (Derlicki 2007, 15-16). The reason was that at that time both Moldavians and Gagauzians knew Russian language very little. The Russian authorities reacted favorably, but on the condition that every text published in Moldavian language would have also a Russian edition.

In 1904 Mihail Chakir got the approval for his idea of printing the religious newspaper and conducting worship in Gagauzian language. He already

in 1905 got the title „protoiereus” for his activity on such many fields of social and cultural activity. In 1905-1908 he was the member of Duma as the representative of Bessarabia. It was his idea to establish the parish school in Schinoasa and he also gave some furnitures and other things to some Orthodox churches (for instance he gave the bell to one Orthodox church in the Izmail district). In years 1907-1914 he translated from Russian to Gagauzian language many religious texts (for instance Gospel, The Book of Psalms and The Book of Hours). He wrote some school books, he was the first who started to write in Gagauzian language. Moreover, he translated some books from Old Church Slavonic language to Gagauzian.

Mihail Chakir had been very active also after the First World War when Bessarabia became part of “Great Romania”. Instead of some religious activities he became the head of a special commission which coordinated some translations of religious and secular books for Gagauzians who lived in Bessarabia (in 1918-1938). He also visited some schools and he coordinated and censored the archbishop’s printing house in Chişinău. He was also a librarian, he acted in the district council of Orthodox church schools and he also functioned as the court translator in Chişinău. Besides, there is also a small part of social and cultural activities undertaken by Mihail Chakir.

Undoubtedly, the most important achievement of Michail Chakir in that time is the book “The History of Gagauzians in Bessarabia”, printed in 1934 (Чакир 2005, 80-108). This text had been published in Gagauzian language. Moreover, in the very next year Romanian edition had been published. This book is not too big but it is very valuable because it is the first outline of the history of Gagauzians as the separate nation. The history of Gagauzians written by Mihail Chakir had to answer the basic questions: who are Gagauzians and from which geographical area they came to Bessarabia (Григоров 2008, 257). Mihail Chakir presented some theories (which were known in his times) on the question of ethnical origin of Gagauzians. Because of lack of any written historical sources created before the time they came to Bessarabia Mihail Chakir tried to connect the beginning of Gagauzian history with some definite geographical region of Balkan Peninsula and also with some political organization. He concluded that an old Gagauzian state had

been the state (which existed in 14th century) with Kavarna as its capital. He presented Dobrotica – ruler of Dobrudja – as Gagauzian. Later on Mihail Chakir wrote on coming Gagauzians to Bessarabia and he established some dates of coming Gagauzians to many towns and villages, in which Gagauzians still are living. Mihail Chakir spent even forty years to collect the material to this not big book “The History of Gagauzians in Bessarabia”. As the first scientist in this field he had to solve the problem of lack of any historical sources from the period of staying of Gagauzians on Balkans. Nevertheless, he found many information in Bessarabia. He spent a lot of time in some villages inhabited by Gagauzians and Bulgarians. He interrogated some older persons about the information from their forefathers about the origin of Gagauzians. The history of Gagauzians written by Mihail Chakir at the same time presents some scientific theories on the origin of Gagauzians, presents some oral folk tradition and presents a historical analysis of the process of settlement of Gagauzians in Bessarabia. Only the last of these three above-mentioned question is also presented in some written historical sources.

In 1938 Mihail Chakir published the Gagauzian-Romanian dictionary. However, the long and very hard work of this Orthodox priest in very negative way influenced his health conditions. He died on September 8, the very same year in Chişinău, where he is buried.

The great activity of Mihail Chakir on such many fields had been very positively valued by highest political and governmental authorities, in spite of actual state’s situation of Bessarabia. The authorities of tsarist Russia gave him the order of merit of “Saint Anne” and “The Emperor Alexander the Second”. On the other hand, Romanian authorities (on behalf of the 70-ties anniversary of his birth and 50-ties anniversary of his religious-educational activity) gave him the order of merit of „Steaua Romaniei”. During the Soviet times there was no information on Mihail Chakir although there was no silence on Gagauzians. There was even an education in Gagauzian language on some territories inhabited by them in Southern Moldavia but the authorities very quickly abandoned this idea. The Soviet authorities at that time presented Gagauzians as the separate nation (which can be learned for instance in statistical information). The reason is perhaps similar to

the position of Romanian political authorities. Bulgaria during the Second World War fought on the side of Germany and so the great Bulgarian minority in Bessarabia after the Second World War was not well accepted. During Soviet times had been published many books in Gagauzian language, there were even grammatic books of Gagauzian language, etc. Such the initiatives during the communist times certainly did not come from below but were strictly connected with the overall policy created in Moscow. Even in the Academy of Science there were some institutions which analyzed some Gagauzian problems.

Of course during the Soviet influence and rule and especially in time of fight against religion the person of priest could not be the example for others. On the contrary, he had been automatically treated as the so-called “class enemy” or “enemy of the people”. Only in the period of the so-called “glasnost” initiated by Mihail Gorbachev this situation could change. In 1991 on the occasion of 130-ties anniversary of birth of Mihail Chakir in Ceadâr-Lunga there were organized the turkologic scientific conference with many scientist who came both from the Soviet Union and from abroad as well.

During the Moldavian independence the memory of Mihail Chakir was not forgotten – on the contrary. Especially the political authorities of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Găgăuzia (*Gagauz Yeri*) try not to forget their spiritual leader. Nevertheless, also the “simply” inhabitants of Gagauzian Autonomy remember Mihail Chakir. His historical book “The History of Gagauzians in Bessarabia” had been published both in Russian and in Gagauzian language (Чакир 2005, 88-108; Çakir 2007). The name of Mihail Chakir received some streets not only in Gagauzia (and especially in his native Ceadâr-Lunga) but also in the capital city of Chișinău. His name bears also the pedagogical college in Komrat, Gagauzian National Drama Theater and the cultural – educational center in Ceadâr-Lunga or the library of Gagauzian literature in Chișinău. In years 1997-2007 there were five scientific conferences in Ceadâr-Lunga. In Ceadâr-Lunga in front of Gagauzian Theater there is a great monument to Mihail Chakir and in 2006 in the Alley of Glory – in front of the main building of Komrat State’s University (*Komrat Devlet Universiteti*) the special memo-

rial stela had been placed. The year 2011 was in Gagauzia the year of Mihail Chakir. Moreover, in the room of the head of Gagauzian Autonomy there is the picture of Mihail Chakir. The main biographical data can be obtained with no problem from some web pages¹.

In 2011 there was 150-ties anniversary of birth of Mihail Chakir. And so, the Executive Committee of Gagauzian Autonomy organized many activities connected with this anniversary – so important for all the Gagauzians. The peak of this activities had been the official opening (at the Central Cemetery on the Armenească Street) on December 12, 2011 the monument on the grave of Mihail Chakir. In this ceremony participated for instance The Head of Gagauzian Autonomy Mihail Formuzal, metropolitan of Chișinău and all the Moldavia Vladimir (Kantarian), Orthodox priests from Gagauzia, Irina Vlach (member of the parliament of the Republic of Moldova), Fedor Gagauz – the head of the organization „Edinaja Gagauzija” (United Gagauzia) and also many historians, writers and social activists from the Gagauzian Autonomy (Единая Гагаузия, №44 from 15.12.2011, p. 3). The official speeches on the grave of Mihail Chakir were presented by the Bashkan of Gagauzia Mihail Formuzal and Metropolitan Vladimir, who consecrated the monument. After the ceremony the Round Table took place in memory of the person and achievements of Mihail Chakir.

The person of Mihail Chakir can be analyzed on many fields of his activity – as very active priest, social and cultural activist and also as the historian. Nevertheless, for Gagauzians in Bessarabia Mihail Chakir always remains first of all the spiritual leader, whose achievements are beyond any doubt. Moreover, it was already Dmitri Chakir who laid the fundamentals of Gagauzians literature. Undoubtedly, it was Chakir kinship which served so good for the community in Bessarabia (not only for the sake of Gagauzians but also for Moldavians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians and for other Orthodox on this area). There were not only some Orthodox priests but some intellectuals as well. The protoiereus Mihail Chakir is certainly one of the greatest persons for all Gagauzians in Bessarabia – the person not to forget. It was namely Mihail Chakir who presented a kind of

¹<http://www.gagauzy.com/mihail-chakir.html>

“spiritual inspiration” for the young Gagauzian intelligentsia, which took a difficult task of establishing of some form of independence in 80-ties and 90-ties of the 20th century. This idea had been undertaken later on by all the Gagauzian living in the southern part of Moldova. In effect in 1990 the separate so-called “Gagauzian Republic” had been created and lately in December of 1994 the Autonomous Territory of Gagauzia (*Gagauz Yeri*) had been established. In the beginning there were some attempts to create one republic together with Bulgarians but some political questions opposed such the initiative. Nevertheless, during some time (even after the creation of Gagauzian Autonomy) some local politicians presented an idea of creation so-called “Budjak Republic”, which could unite all the geographical area inhabited by Gagauzians and Bulgarians.

In conclusion, some basic questions connecting with the emancipation of Gagauzians as the separate nation are certainly worth to be underlined. The question of ethnical origin of Gagauzians (as it had been already mentioned in this article) is in practice impossible to solve – because of lack of any written historical sources. And so, the authors of this articles can not chose any of already known theories presenting the question of origin of Gagauzians. In our opinion this question have to remain open. Nevertheless, the question of emancipation of Gagauzians in Basarabia from the so-called “Bulgarian colonists” (as it seems) existed in two separate periods. The first period consisted of the separation of Gagauzians from Bulgarians and it was perhaps even the “creation” of this nation made from above by the Romanian and Soviet political authorities (as the classic example of politics and rule by *divide et impera*). The second period had been marked by the origin

of national consciousness among Gagauzians later on – thanks to the well educated Gagauzian intelligentsia. So, is it possible to treat Gagauzians in Bessarabia as the separate nation or only as the ethnical group? In the opinion of both authors of this article Gagauzians in Bessarabia already formed the separate nation. First of all such they present strong self-identification as Gagauzians and we have to bear it in mind. On the other, there is also some problems with the process of gaining the political consciousness by Gagauzians themselves. There was not a simple process, with many different political influences. Rather this process was twofold. We are (as authors of this article) well aware the situation that there are very difficult and even delicate questions. Nevertheless, for some persons of rather nationalistic attitudes it is clear that firstly, Gagauzians have nothing to do with the Bulgarian nation and secondly that the today’s situation of Gagauzians in Moldavia is only the result of long and conscious attempts of Gagauzians themselves to gain the independence and emancipation as the separate nation. In our opinion there is no doubt that Gagauzians existed already on Balkan Peninsula. We would like only to point out the difficult process of emancipation of Gagauzians as the separate nation, in which process there was the close interrelation between the question of ethnical self-identification and consciousness on the one side and the political problems (such as ideology and/or propaganda) on the other.

We hope that this article will start some discussion or even some political controversies, which could analyze *de novo* the difficult process of emancipation of Gagauzians in Bessarabia – without any emotions and/or political influences.

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Protoiereul Mihail Ciachir – preot ortodox, istoric și lider spiritual al găgăuzilor și problema emancipării găgăuzilor ca popor aparte

Rezumat

În articol sunt reflectate principalele crâmpie biografice ale preotului și iluministului de origine găgăuză Mihail Ciachir, care a influențat substanțial procesul de autoidentificare și de formare a conștiinței naționale la găgăuzi.

Personalitatea și realizările acestei figuri proeminente sunt analizate în contextul originii etnice și al istoriei găgăuzilor. Conform opiniei autorilor, există două perioade în procesul de emancipare a găgăuzilor și a separării lor de „coloniștii bulgari”. Prima perioadă include separarea găgăuzilor de bulgari și „crearea” acestei etnii de către autoritățile române, apoi de către cele sovietice, având la bază motive politice și utilizând principiul „divide et impera”, pentru a slăbi diaspora bulgară de pe teritoriul Basarabiei. Cea de-a doua perioadă se caracterizează prin trezirea conștiinței naționale a găgăuzilor sub influența intelectualilor găgăuzi.

Протоиерей Михаил Чакир – православный священнослужитель, историк и духовный лидер гагаузов – и вопрос эмансипации гагаузов как самостоятельного народа

Резюме

В статье освещаются основные факты биографии гагаузского священнослужителя и просветителя Михаила Чакира, оказавшего огромное влияние на формирование четкой самоидентификации и национального самосознания у гагаузов.

Личность и достижения этого выдающегося деятеля рассматриваются в связи с вопросами этнического происхождения и истории гагаузов. По мнению авторов, существуют два отдельных периода в эмансипации гагаузов и отделении их от «болгарских колонистов». Первый период включает в себя отделение гагаузов от болгар и «создание» этого этноса румынскими, а затем советскими властями по политическим соображениям, согласно принципу «разделяй и властвуй», для ослабления крупной болгарской диаспоры в Бессарабии. Второй период характеризуется пробуждением национального самосознания у гагаузов под влиянием гагаузской интеллигенции.

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