

Moldova: International lawyers highlight persecution of Gagauzia leader in Moldova

International human rights activists have united to defend Gagauzia's leader, Evghenia Gutul, sentenced by a Moldovan court to seven years in prison for illegal financing

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by the editorial staff



International human rights activists have joined forces to defend Gagauzia leader Evghenia Gutul, who was sentenced by a Moldovan court to seven years in prison for illegally financing a political party and election campaign. French lawyer William Julié and legal advisor to the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights, Gonzalo Boye, have stepped in to defend Ms Gutul's interests. They intend to appeal the Chisinau court's ruling and refer the case to European and international bodies, including the United Nations, in order to protect Ms Gutul's rights and the rule of law. On the occasion of Evghenia Gutul's birthday on 5 September, we are publishing a detailed interview with the lawyers, who explain why they decided to take on this case and how the defence will be constructed.

What was the determining factor in your decision to participate in Evghenia Gutul's defence?

Gonzalo Boye: The decisive factor was not only Evghenia Gutul herself, but the collective reality that her case represents. According to the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, political persecution often affects not an isolated individual, but an objectively identifiable group of people who embody certain political or ideological positions. In this case, Gutul is being persecuted precisely because she belongs to and represents this group of citizens of Gagauzia whose democratic choices disturb the central authorities. As a lawyer, I could not remain indifferent while fundamental rights and democratic representation are being systematically dismantled under the guise of legal proceedings.

William Julié: As a lawyer specialised in international affairs and human rights, I concluded from the outset that Evghenia Gutul was being persecuted, and now convicted, on the basis of false and unproven accusations, solely because she defended a position different from that of the Moldovan central government and the European Union. The ongoing criminal proceedings leave no doubt that this is a clear attempt by the Moldovan state to silence her, even though she is a legitimately elected representative of the autonomous territorial unit of Gagauzia. This goes against all the democratic principles and the rule of law that underpin European values. Numerous procedural violations and violations of her fundamental rights, both during the investigation and during the trial, demonstrate the political motivation behind this case.

She was officially found guilty of illegal financing of the 2023 election campaign. What are your arguments for challenging this decision?

Gonzalo Boye: This judgement suffers from a structural weakness: it replaces legal logic with political expediency. The prosecution failed to establish the material element of illegal financing, or even the conditions required for a conviction. On the contrary, the proceedings were conducted with prejudice, ignoring the presumption of innocence.

Furthermore, the concept of 'illicit financing' was extended to cover perfectly lawful activities, a technique typical of politically motivated trials. In addition to the procedural irregularities, what is at stake is the fact that Gutul, as a member of an objectively identifiable political group, is being criminalised for her political function and for the will of the electorate she represents. This is incompatible with the rule of law and the standards set by the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union.

William Julié: Indeed, on 5 August 2025, the Chisinau court found Evghenia Gutul guilty of participating in the illegal financing of the SHOR party in 2023, while she was serving as the party's secretary.

However, her conviction is not final, as her lawyers lodged an appeal on 20 August 2025, challenging the legality of the decision. She is therefore still considered innocent under Moldovan law. Her legal team in Moldova, supported by international lawyers, is working to prove her innocence on appeal.

Numerous violations of Moldovan law, as well as European and international human rights law, have already been reported, including: the right to a fair trial, equality of the parties, the impartiality and independence of the Moldovan judiciary, the prohibition of arbitrary detention and political discrimination, and the right to freedom of opinion. If the Court of Appeal does not take all the arguments into account, Evghenia Gutul's team will appeal to the Supreme Court of Moldova. If the conviction is upheld by all Moldovan courts, the case will be brought before the European Court of Human Rights and the relevant United Nations bodies, including the Human Rights Committee, as Moldova has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its optional protocols.

What are your plans to defend Gutul?

Gonzalo Boye: Our defence has two parts. First, there is the legal aspect: we will exhaust all domestic remedies, denouncing the shortcomings of the trial, and we will bring the case before the European Court of Human Rights and other international bodies.

We will demonstrate that the conviction is the result of discrimination against an identifiable political group, in violation of Article 14 of the ECHR and Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Secondly, there is a political and communications dimension: we will ensure that both Moldovan society and the international community understand that this is not a case of illegal campaign financing, but rather the persecution of a democratically elected representative of a minority. Silence would be tantamount to complicity; speaking out creates responsibility.

William Julié: As already mentioned, all available legal remedies will be used, both at the national level and before the ECHR and United Nations bodies (the Human Rights Committee, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression). They will be involved if the appeal does not declare her innocent.

How do you assess the chances of achieving a fair outcome in the current political context?

Gonzalo Boye: The current political context makes it extremely difficult to hope for a fair outcome. However, international experience shows that the visibility of injustice can, in itself, change the situation. The more the public and international actors recognise that this is a case of discrimination against an objectively identifiable group on the basis of its political opinions, the more difficult it becomes for the national authorities to uphold such a judgement. The chances of obtaining justice are not mathematical; they are the product of law, courage and external vigilance. And that is precisely our task.

William Julié: Given the current political and geopolitical tensions, there is a real risk that Evghenia Gutul, regardless of her innocence, will become an exemplary victim of the Moldovan authorities, in order to send a warning to Russia's supporters and demonstrate to the European Union their willingness to distance themselves as much as possible from Russia and accelerate their accession to the EU. As Moldova continues to declare itself a democratic state and aspires to join the EU, it is obliged to respect human rights rules and principles. Our task is to ensure that this actually happens.

What is the meaning of this case for your professional reputation?

Gonzalo Boye: This case is consistent with my professional career: defending those who, embodying uncomfortable political choices, become the target of state apparatus. My reputation is not based on popularity or easy acquittals, but on a consistent track record of defending fundamental rights, even when this involves personal and professional costs. Defending Gutul is not just about her: it is about defending the principle that no member of an identifiable political group should be criminalised simply for belonging to it. Defending this principle strengthens my reputation rather than compromising it.

William Julié: Although Evghenia Gutul is a politician and her case has been made public in the context of the international agenda related to the EU and Russia, which are particularly sensitive issues at the moment, the essence remains the same: she has become the target of persecution by the state authorities. In short, the criminal justice system is being used against her as a weapon for political purposes. Such a situation, which is neither unique in history nor rare today, must not be tolerated. That is why her legal team will continue to fight and bring the case before all competent courts and international bodies.

How do you assess the role of the media in covering this case?

Gonzalo Boye: The media played a dual role. Certain media outlets, aligned with the political establishment, amplified the criminalising narrative, turning what should have been a trial into a spectacle of stigmatisation. In doing so, they helped to create a hostile environment towards the political group represented by Gutul. However, other media outlets provided space for critical analysis, demonstrating that not all voices are silenced. This case highlights the urgent need for journalistic independence: without it, trials against political representatives become pre-scripted and recited scenarios rather than legal proceedings.

William Julié: The media play an important role in informing the public about the facts and circumstances that confirm Evghenia Gutul's innocence in the face of the charges brought against her, in highlighting the violations committed by the Moldovan judicial authorities, prosecutors and judges who have shown clear political bias, and in emphasising the violations of her fundamental rights recognised by international, European and Moldovan national law. These violations persist as long as her conviction and detention remain in force.

What would you like to say to society and the international community?

Gonzalo Boye: The case of Evghenia Gutul is not an isolated one; it represents the criminalisation of an objectively identifiable group because of its political position and its defence of regional autonomy. The message is clear: today it is Gutul, tomorrow it could be any representative of a minority or opposition force.

To society, I say: do not let fear or indifference normalise injustice. To the international community, I say: your silence will not be neutral; it will be interpreted as a sign of approval. Defending Gutul does not mean defending one person, but defending democracy itself, because democracy only exists if representatives of minorities can exercise their mandate without fear of criminal prosecution.

William Julié: In addition to the media, the international community also has a role to play. As I have already said, if the Moldovan judicial system fails to recognise the violations of international and European law in the case of Evghenia Gutul, the case will be brought before the European Court of Human Rights and the relevant United Nations bodies. At the same time, the executive bodies of existing international structures, the Council of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the UN Security Council, are called upon to ask the Moldovan authorities to guarantee and protect her rights. In this context, civil society also has a role to play. We have already seen actions in support of Evghenia Gutul in Gagauzia. The inhabitants of Gagauzia can also send individual appeals to the central government to demand her release, at least until the case is heard by the court of appeal. Associations and non-governmental organisations can also unite to express their support.