

# Construction of sub-national identity vis-à-vis parent state: Gagauz case in Moldova

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The current state of Gagauzia, an autonomous territory within Moldova since the 1990s, reflects its troubled historical past and geographical location. Gagauz identity is constructed in an environment conditioned by the region's geopolitical position and the traditional rule of larger groups. Other factors, such as ethno-linguistic affiliation, historical narratives, incomplete national consciousness, and poor economic conditions, further influence Gagauz identity, which may be in some ways different from that of the parent state's dominant group. This paper tries to shed light on how Gagauz self-identity is constructed and how it is contradistinguished from that of Moldova by examining the case partly through an analysis of the Gagauz elite's narrative. This construction is controversial and at the same time perplexing, given Moldova's own quest for identity and geopolitical orientation. In some instances, the parent state can be positioned as 'Other' due to the Romanophobia and Russophilia of the Gagauz; in other cases, Moldova can be internalized as part of Gagauz statehood vis-à-vis a pan-Romanian agenda. This paper is part of a larger project that has generated original data derived from the author's field trip to Gagauzia, based on the narratives of the local elite from this small and under-studied region. The study takes a top-down approach in considering identity construction.

Key words: Gagauz, Gagauzia, Moldova, national identity



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### ***Introduction***

Gagauzia, or *Gagauz Yeri* in the local language, is a small self-governing region in the south of Moldova. Set up in its current form in 1995 and officially known as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, the entity occupies 1,832 km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into three *dolays* (districts) in four enclaves, with the seat of local government installed in the township of Comrat. Of a regional population of 155,600 (4.6% of the Moldovan total), the Gagauz constitute an absolute majority (82.1%) followed by Bulgarians, Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians.

Orthodox Christians by religion and Oghuz Turks by language, the titular ethnic group of the autonomy, the Gagauz, transmigrated to Bessarabia (present-day Moldova and Ukraine) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Since then the core group has lived under the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Romania, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of Moldova.

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Decades of Russification and Sovietization, the weak development of the Gagauz language, and the multi-ethnic nature of Bessarabia have all contributed to the construction of Gagauz identity. Underdeveloped during the Soviet era, the Gagauz national consciousness nonetheless underwent an awakening in the late 1980s and claimed a separate ethno-territorial identity.

Unlike other ethno-territorial problems that broke out as violent and bloody conflicts with the collapse of the USSR, the Gagauz movement for self-determination in the early 1990s proceeded relatively peacefully. Proclaimed in August 1990, the Gagauz Republic, the first *de facto* state<sup>1</sup> in the post-Soviet space, existed as a semi-independent region until it opted for reintegration into Moldova in the mid-1990s following a series of negotiations between the Gagauz and Moldovan authorities.

The region currently suffers from multiple internal problems (fragile state of the Gagauz language and culture; poor infrastructure; unemployment; out-migration; etc.), while its relations with the central government in Chişinău have usually

1 Kosienkowski, M. "The Gagauz Republic: Internal Dynamics of De Facto Statehood," *Journal Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, Volume 24, Issue 1, 2017, p.116.

been far from normal. In fact, the relevant competences between the central and autonomous authorities have not been clearly delineated.

The contemporary state of Gagauzia also reflects its troubled history and geographical location. Historically living in a border region fought over and treated as geopolitically important by various empires, the Gagauz are still subject to the geopolitical influence of diverse power sources. They share ethno-linguistic connections with Turkey, while retaining a strong historical affiliation with Russia. As a result of Moldova's westward aspirations and the relevant European Union (EU) policies, Gagauzia has also been subject to European influence.

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Caught in a tangled web of influences and historically ruled by larger groups, Gagauz identity is, therefore, being constructed in a complicated environment: ethno-linguistic affiliation (ethnic kinship with Turks, Russian as a *lingua franca* in the region), historical narratives (allegiance towards Russia; the painful Romanian period; Soviet nostalgia), complex geopolitical position (the crossroads of the EU, Russia and Turkey), incomplete national consciousness and emigration (*gastarbeiters* in Russia and Turkey, and to some extent in the EU) further confuse the situation and may partially explain the complicated conditions that influence Gagauz identity, which is definitely different from that of the parent state's dominant group.

Voiced by a local student to James Kapaló during the latter's ethnographic research in the region, the quote 'The Turks want to turn us into Turks, the Bulgarians into Bulgarians, the Russians into Russians, the Moldovans into Romanians and now the Greeks want to try the same. Why don't they just let us be Gagauz!'<sup>2</sup> illustrates the desperation of the Gagauz in seeking their identity, as well as the efforts of outside forces to influence Gagauz identity.

This research is part of a larger project, the main empirical findings of which are also derived from the author's field trip to Gagauzia and interviews with representatives of the Gagauz

2 Kapaló, J. *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p.82.

elite, and considers the role of top-down influence in the construction of identity. While the main project mainly dealt with the construction of Gagauz identity and the influence of external forces on this process, a couple of questions touched upon the Gagauz–Moldovan relationship. Based on these findings, this paper aims to reveal how Gagauz identity is constructed in relation to the parent state, Moldova, and how this process affects Moldovan statehood and territorial integrity.

This project utilized intensive document and media analysis and participant observation, but these are supplementary to data supplied by the elite interviews. Drawn from a wider spectrum in interviews for the overall project, this paper includes responses by the following personalities: Mikhail Sirkeli, a civil society activist, journalist, and head of a local non-governmental organization; Todur Zanet, a poet, journalist, folklorist, and editor-in-chief of the first Gagauz-language newspaper; Ivan Patraman, actor and director, and the producer of the first Gagauz-language film; Leonid Dobrov, a Soviet dissident, active member of the Gagauz national movement, and ex-mayor of Comrat; Ekaterina Jekova, a journalist, member of the local parliament, and former chair of Gagauz Radio & Television Company.

### *Gagauz identity and its key elements*

As a product of geographical, historical, political, and social factors, including post-Soviet existential challenges, Gagauz identity has been constructed by emulating discourses that have ‘instrumentalised and mythologised narratives of ethno-genesis, origins and religious destiny.’<sup>3</sup> The autochthonous component of Gagauz identity is signified through the Gagauz language as well as self-governance and national symbols. The linguistic and cultural expansion of external forces, especially Russian, plays a crucial role in undermining the situation of Gagauz, since the latter is usually overshadowed: never developed as an administrative, academic, or ‘higher society’ tongue, Gagauz has also gradually been losing its vernacularity. Therefore, the evaluation of the Gagauz language is currently very pessimistic. While discussing the problem, the author heard from his interlocutors such terms

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3 Ibid, p.77-78

as ‘underdeveloped,’<sup>4</sup> ‘degradation,’<sup>5</sup> ‘catastrophic,’<sup>6</sup> ‘tragic,’ ‘disappearance,’ and ‘historic loss.’<sup>7</sup>

Instead of cultivating the Gagauz language and culture, as was expected at the beginning of the national movement, the situation was aggravated during (and despite) the autonomy, since there exist no kindergartens or schools with Gagauz as the main language of instruction. Rather, it is taught for only a few hours per week, like a foreign language. The position of the Moldovan authorities toward this problem can be called essentially neutral: they neither undermine the Gagauz language, nor promote it. Nevertheless, they are definitely interested in pushing the Moldovan/Romanian language, which is not popular in daily life in Gagauzia.

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Rather, it is the Russian-language kindergartens and schools, a heritage of the Soviet period that are still maintained here. Furthermore, parent–child communication in Russian is growing, based on the assumption that this language will open more career opportunities in the future, both within and outside Gagauzia, and is now displacing Gagauz from families, too. Intensive upbringing in Russian both at home and school raises concerns that future generations may not be able to properly master the Gagauz idiom, further threatening its continued existence and damaging ethnic identity. As a result, UNESCO has registered Gagauz as an endangered language.<sup>8</sup>

The state of the Gagauz tongue has been worsening parallel to and as a result of the dominance of the Russian language, which, through its role as a *lingua franca* as well as a language of administration, education, and religion, has transformed the Gagauz ‘from largely illiterate monoglot speakers of a Turkic[c] idiom’<sup>9</sup> into a currently bilingual ethnic group. In fact, Russian can be listed among the main elements of Gagauz identity

4 Author’s interview with Mihail Sirkeli, February 5, 2019

5 Author’s interview with Ivan Patraman, February 14, 2019

6 Author’s interview with Todur Zanet, February 5, 2019

7 Leonid Dobrov, interview with Author, February 5, 2019

8 UNESCO, (2010), *UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap> (Accessed: October 1, 2019)

9 Kapaló, *op.cit.* 2011, p.82.

according to Sirkeli,<sup>10</sup> who argues that defending the right to use the Russian language was one of the founding components of Gagauz autonomy. The importance of Russian has increased in recent decades for several other reasons: it may be seen as a shield against Romanian/Moldovan expansion and, given the lack of employment and massive out-migration, the Russian language enables the Gagauz to work beyond Gagauzia, especially in Russia.

Soviet nostalgia, another noteworthy constituent of Gagauzness, is not a purely psychological and mental construct in our case: within the autonomous state, it is a visible and tangible phenomenon. The main street in the capital still bears the name of Vladimir Lenin, despite occasional calls to rename it. The monument to Lenin still stands firmly in the same street, in front of the government building that houses the offices of both the *Başkan*<sup>11</sup> and the regional assembly, *Halk Topluşu*. Memorials dedicated to the Great Patriotic War and Soviet–Afghan War can be found in many places across Gagauzia. The celebrations of 22 June<sup>12</sup> (the day in 1941 when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union) and 9 May (Soviet Victory Day over Nazi Germany, 1945) have been solemnly observed in recent years, featuring the Russian-style Immortal Regiment and St. George ribbons.<sup>13</sup>

The collective memory in Gagauzia has evolved a positive image of the Soviet period, which is associated with mass literacy, certainty about tomorrow, stability, and lower prices. The associated nostalgia has become sharper, especially when contrasting the period with post-Soviet instability and today's reality.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, not only may this phenomenon glorify Soviet achievements, but it also downplays historical tragedies, such as the mass famine of 1946–1947: in other words, the Gagauz collective memory prefers to forget when it comes to the

10 Author's interview with Mihail Sirkeli, February 5, 2019.

11 *Başkan* (Gagauz: leader, head) is the official title for the governor of the Gagauz autonomy. The *Başkan* is elected in a direct election every four years.

12 Gagauzinfo.md, (2015) Руководство Гагаузии почтило память павших в Великой Отечественной войне солдат [The leadership of Gagauzia honored the memory of soldiers who fell in the Great Patriotic War], 22 June, Available at: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=18916> (Accessed: April 23, 2019).

13 Gagauzinfo.md, (2017) Жители Вулканешт отметили 9 мая Маршем Победы и акцией «Бессмертный полк» [Residents of Vulcanesht celebrated May 9 with the Victory March and the action "Immortal Regiment"], 9 May, Available at: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=32878> (Accessed: April 23, 2019).

14 Author's interview with Ekaterina Jekova, February 10, 2019.

destructive episodes associated with the USSR.

The Orthodox church, one of the pillars of Gagauzness, also links it to the Russian world. While the Gagauz had converted to Orthodoxy long before they fell under Russian influence, their church is presently subject to the Moscow Patriarchate and liturgical sermons in Gagauz churches are conducted in Russian.

The local identity is also tightly associated with the current territorial autonomy. It was not Gagauz identity alone that fostered self-governance; the inverse process has also been happening, with the autonomy forging Gagauzness. The way in which autonomy was achieved is important to mythmaking about Gagauz uniqueness. It is proudly stated that the Gagauz case was the only conflict in the post-Soviet space that was solved peacefully.<sup>15</sup> This accomplishment is further remarkable due to the absence of any intermediaries. This is why ex-*Başkan* Mihail Formuzal once noted that ‘Gagauzia’s experience in conflict solution is an example for other countries,’ referring particularly to other territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are concerns over the alleged reduction of Gagauzia’s competences over the years against the backdrop of the absence of boundaries between central (Chişinău) and regional (Comrat) authorities.<sup>17</sup>

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Turkic kinship is an important cornerstone of Gagauz identity: despite controversial theories on the Gagauz ethnogenesis, the community of blood and language contributes to the emergence of identity-building myths among both ordinary people and professional historians. The author’s interviewees stated that every Gagauz proudly acknowledges their roots, while museums typically display the possible routes of the ancient Turkic tribes from Central Asia to the Balkans and Bessarabia. This very component has also given a strong impetus to, and helped to legitimize, the Gagauz claim to autonomy, as well as their relations with Turkey and other Turkic states.

15 Author’s interview with Mihail Sirkeli, February 5, 2019.

16 SputnikNews.ru, (2017) Экс-башган: опыт Гагаузии в решении конфликта - пример для стран, [Ex-Başgan: Gagauzia’s experience in resolving the conflict - an example for countries], 15 October, Available at: <https://az.sputniknews.ru/expert/20171015/412329489/gagauzija-narod-azerbajdzhan-moldova-konflikt.html> (Accessed: April 21, 2019).

17 Author’s interview with Ekaterina Jekova, February 10, 2019.



Romanophobia should also be examined as part of contemporary Gagauz discourse. The interwar Romanian rule has definitely left traces – mostly negative – in the Gagauz collective memory. However, post-Second World War Soviet propaganda also played an active role in constructing the negative Romanian image. Echoing the popular Soviet discourse, the local narrative still refers to the period between 1918 and 1940 as the ‘Romanian occupation’ (during which Romanians allegedly planned to assimilate and even annihilate the Gagauz) and contraposes it against ‘Soviet liberation.’<sup>18</sup> Having resurfaced in the late 1980s, when unionist euphoria swept Moldova, this antipathy has resurfaced in the present and been reconstructed in light of current realities: the old stereotype of ‘the Romanian gendarme’ was not only reproduced, but also exaggerated by the Soviet propaganda machine to form the image of Romanians as fascists. That the Gagauz were treated as second-class citizens or beaten by Romanian teachers at schools has been exaggerated as it has entered the Gagauz collective memory, which, as noted earlier, usually ignores infamous pages from Gagauzia’s Soviet history.

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In general, Gagauz identity has been influenced by its minority status: for centuries, this community was an ethnic and linguistic minority in Bessarabia, a region dominated by Romanian and Slavic-language speakers. In the vast Turkic world to which the Gagauz ethnically and linguistically belong, they find themselves as a religious minority among the predominant Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as a double minority, an ethnic minority living within a non-Russian republic, in the former Soviet Union,

the Gagauz could not effectively develop their own language, education, and bureaucracy, and therefore ‘are slower in the process of downsizing the Soviet imagination.’<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the initial impetus for Gagauz autonomy was to resist the hegemony of the Moldovan identity ‘by embracing the Russian language and Soviet heritage on the one hand’<sup>21</sup> and by constructing a Gagauz

18 BalkanInsight.com, (2018) *Gagauz Resist Moldova’s Embrace of West*. 3 January, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/03/gagauz-resist-moldova-s-embrace-of-west-01-01-2018-1/> (Accessed: April 23, 2019).

19 Kapaló, *op.cit.*, 2011, p.5.

20 Demirdirek, H. “Living in The Present: The Gagauz in Moldova”, *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 178:1, 2000, p.72.

21 Demirdirek, H. “Step Across the Border Transnational Encounters and Nation-Making,” *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2006, p.45.



national identity on the other. Moreover, despite a centuries-long subjection, Gagauz identity itself is not discriminatory, as its byzantine nature is associated with tolerance and co-existence with other ethnic groups in this multi-ethnic region.

### ***Gagauz identity versus Moldova***

Gagauz identity, and how it is shaped, certainly affects Moldova, the parent state. As a former part of a larger entity, the Soviet Union, Moldova itself is struggling to construct its own identity, hesitating between Moldovan nationalism and Romanian irredentism. Another fluctuation is apparent between Euro- and Russo-centric geopolitical orientations. The country must also cope with internal territorial problems and ethnic minorities: Transnistria has been developing as a *de facto* state for nearly three decades, while Gagauz and ethnic Bulgarians in the south may have uneasy relations with the center. Moreover, at least one third of the entire population consider themselves Russian-speaking.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, it is extremely important for Moldova to understand and take into account Gagauz identity, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum, in which the overwhelming majority in Gagauzia rejected the westward rush and favoured a Russian-led integrationist project instead. As for the third question in the plebiscite, 98.9% of voters supported Gagauzia's right to declare independence should Moldova lose or surrender its own independence.<sup>23</sup> This was a direct reference to Article 1.4 of the 1994 Autonomy Law, which is touched upon later in this paper.

How the parent state appears to the Gagauz is quite controversial: Moldova is certainly constructed as the Other to the Gagauz Self, and the relationship with Moldova is eyed through the prism of several factors. Firstly, the fact that Gagauzia has become part of Moldova is accepted as a result of historical developments, but perceived neutrally, if not negatively.

The Gagauz–Moldovan relationship is heavily shaped by

22 Point.md (2019) Додон с трибуны ООН: Треть населения Молдовы считают себя русскоязычными, [Dodon from the UN tribune: A third of the population of Moldova consider themselves Russian-speaking], 26 September, Available at: <https://point.md/ru/novosti/politika/dodon-s-tribuny-onn-tret-naseleniia-moldovy-schitaiut-sebia-russkoiazychnymi> (Accessed: September 26, 2019).

23 RFE/RL.org (2014) *Gagauzia Voters Reject Closer EU Ties For Moldova*, 3 February, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gagauz-referendum-counting/25251251.html> (Accessed: September 27, 2019).

Romanophobia, which has already been portrayed and explained. Hence, any hypothetical Romanian–Moldovan unification, whether it is real or imagined and whether is it on or off the agenda, haunts the Gagauz narrative and behaviour. According to Sirkeli, the pan-Romanian discourse, although artificially bred, is heightening uncertainty and fear in Gagauzia and pushing it more strongly toward Russia.<sup>24</sup> This discourse may intertwine with the image of the EU and associate the West with Romania. Faced with a Romanian/Western advance into the region, Russia and to some extent Turkey may be seen as protectors for the Gagauz.

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One thing the author himself found very interesting is that Moldovan statehood is not only constructed as the Other, but in some cases even internalized: in this context, Moldovans (both politicians and the population) may be seen as the Romanian Other, while Moldova is treated as a state of the Gagauz. This argument can be supported by the fact that Moldova’s unification with Romania has been impossible to achieve, partly due to Gagauz resistance (as well as other factors, such as the Transnistrian problem): *‘Whenever a wave of unionism breaks out in Moldova, all the Gagauz, regardless of their views, become the patriots of Moldova and struggle against Moldova’s joining any entities,*’ says Dobrov, most likely exaggerating Gagauzia’s contribution to Moldovan independence:

*Without the Gagauz, Moldova has already been part of Romania. Whether it would be better or worse is another question. We do not know. But there would have not been an independent Moldova. It would have been incorporated 25 years ago. All presidents, both the former ones and the incumbent Dodon, accept that the Gagauz are more statist<sup>25</sup> than the Moldovans themselves.<sup>26</sup>*

In other words, the understanding of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ is quite relative in this region: Moldova is the Other for the Gagauz in general but, if placed alongside Romania, or when the topic of Romanian unification comes up, then Moldova quickly becomes

<sup>24</sup> Author’s interview with Mihail Sirkeli, February 5, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> The word ‘государственники’ (‘gosudarstvenniki’) was used in the original interview.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview with Leonid Dobrov, February 5, 2019.

part of the Self against the Romanian Other. This narrative is reflected in plural nuances, including the Moldovan versus Romanian language controversy, with most of the interviewees, in step with the general trend in Gagauzia, preferring the notion of a ‘Moldovan’ rather than ‘Romanian’ language.

It is no surprise that the Gagauz electorate, which may seem small and insignificant, is intensively embraced by Moldova’s anti-unionist political figures and parties, most notably by the current president, pro-Russian Igor Dodon, who visits Gagauzia frequently and with great pleasure, enjoying some measure of sympathy there.

Despite this internalization of the Moldovan state, the Gagauz generally adhere to the 1994 Autonomy Law, more precisely Article 1.4, which legally reserves their right for external self-determination and acts as a guarantee against antagonistic Romanian–Moldovan unification. The self-determination paragraph stemmed from the political realities of the mid-1990s, necessary to keep the Gagauz out of Romania if Moldova decided to join its western neighbour, of which the Gagauz historically had a negative collective memory. In the 2010s, the paragraph, having received a new dimension, was also interpreted in terms of Moldova’s EU ambitions. This item can be expected to be brought onto the political agenda again in the event of a partial loss of Moldovan sovereignty due to EU membership.

In response to a follow-up question, “what would the Gagauz do, should Moldova turn westward?”, Sirkeli explained that they would also proceed in that direction by inertia as the autonomy does not possess the resources to resist. However, external support might change the balance and provide the lacking resources: “Of course, Gagauzia has no other way out. But things also depend on the support from outside. For example, on how the Russians will counter-act.”<sup>27</sup>

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It must be understood that the Gagauz narrative regarding Moldova is not straightforward; by reflecting historical experience and present realities, the Gagauz may either detach themselves from or attach themselves to Moldova, depending on

<sup>27</sup> Author’s interview with Mihail Sirkeli, February 5, 2019.

the Romanian Other context. Although the Gagauz may have a say in– and occasionally shape –Moldova’s domestic and foreign policy, they apparently do not possess the power that would lead to greater influence.

### *Conclusion*

The contemporary Gagauz identity has a dual nature, Russian and Turkic, with the former apparently having a slightly greater weight. Although acknowledging their Turkic roots, the Gagauz have, over recent decades, become a Russophone community. While the sentiments articulated during the elite interviews represent calls and attempts to construct a distinct identity, including preserving the Gagauz language, little has been done in this regard, leading to the decline of the mother tongue. To explain other key elements of Gagauz identity, this paper has generalized the ways in which the Gagauz feel part of the Turkic world, for example through mythologizing their ancient roots, while maintaining a virtual connection to the Russian world through the Russian language, Orthodox Church, and glorification of the Soviet era.

Gagauzia’s status as an integral, yet autonomous province of Moldova may present its own unique set of problems. Since the autonomous status was formalized in the mid-1990s, Gagauzia has maintained uneasy relations with Chişinău, especially in the context of the devolution of competencies, foreign policy priorities, and the historical Romanophobia contained in the Gagauz narrative. Sometimes the parent state can be alienated as ‘Other’ due to the Romanophobia and Russophilia of the Gagauz; in other instances, Moldova can be internalized as part of Gagauz statehood vis-à-vis the pan-Romanian agenda.

At the same time, the region does not possess sufficient political and economic power to be able to shape the policies of the Republic of Moldova. Nor does it have the resources to secede and become an independent state without outside interference. Therefore, from time to time, Gagauz political forces may either play the self-determination card; be the main supporters of Moldovan statehood; or see Russia and Turkey as protectors against possible Moldovan–Romanian unification.